

American Axle workers in Detroit discuss political issues in strike

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The strike by 3,650 workers at American Axle & Manufacturing at several plants in Michigan and New York, which began more than two weeks ago, raises important political questions about how the working class can oppose the corporate assault on jobs and living standards.

Earlier this week a reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers at the company's main production facility in Detroit, where more than half the strikers are employed. The WSWs team passed out the statement, "Reject UAW plans to sabotage American Axle strike!"

The statement provoked widespread discussion. While a handful of workers—perhaps those closest to the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 235 leadership—attempted to defend the union's actions, the majority of strikers were anxious to engage in discussion about the pattern of wage-cutting agreements accepted by the UAW throughout the auto industry. There was intense and lively discussion about the strategy that was needed to oppose this betrayal.

Many of the workers are in their 30s, 40s and 50s and hired into the plant in 1994, when American Axle was founded by a group of private investors, led by former General Motors and Chrysler executive Richard Dauch. During their working lives they have witnessed nothing but an unchecked offensive by the corporations and a shameless accumulation of riches by auto company executives and Wall Street investors.

They now face an impossible situation in which the company is demanding a two-thirds reduction in their wages and benefits. This demand is coming from a profitable company, with a CEO who pocketed \$9 million in salary, bonuses and stock options in 2006. Fed up with demands for more sacrifice, American Axle workers know full well they're not responsible for the crisis in the auto industry.

The prospect of a "buyout"—which the UAW has negotiated to help parts maker Delphi, as well as GM, Ford and Chrysler rid themselves of tens of thousands of workers—is also unappealing. Too young to retire, where are these workers going to find decent paying jobs in the present economic environment? They recognize that a stand has to be taken now.

This reporter spoke with one worker who has 14 years at American Axle. He described himself as coming from a "strong union family" of steelworkers from the Pittsburgh area. He told me, "The company won't put out money to improve efficiency or repair things like leaky air hoses that are costing the company thousands of dollars. All they want to do is lay off workers and cut our wages because they're looking for the quickest profit and to please Wall Street. They have a one- to five-year-plan to make as much money as possible and don't give a damn about our 25-year plan to make a decent living.

Forbes, the top three American Axle executives more than more than a dozen top Toyota executives," he said, in a remark noteworthy because it reflects a weakening of the anti-Japanese chauvinism pushed by the UAW for decades.

He continued, "When I got here in 1994-95 this place rallied around Dauch as the new owner. He used to come down to the factory floor to talk to us. He would know our names and what jobs we did. But all that changed and now he has built up his empire of 30 factories in Brazil, Poland, Mexico and other countries. Now he is trying to take everything away from people in the original five plants who built this company."

This worker and others tend to see Dauch as a corporate leader who has betrayed their trust and his supposed commitment to American workers.

Supporting Dauch's takeover of GM's axle and driveline plants in 1994, the UAW cultivated an image of Dauch as a different sort of corporate boss, one who would give workers a "voice" in decision-making. In fact he was nothing more than a front man for General Motors, which sought to use his close relations with the UAW to impose a sharp reduction in the cost of producing parts for the Big Three automakers.

After his experience as a Chrysler executive during the 1980 bailout, Dauch clearly concluded that making use of the UAW rather than getting rid of it was a far more effective way of lowering wages, eliminating jobs, speeding up production and tearing up years of shop floor protections.

In his 1993 autobiography, *Passion for Manufacturing*, Dauch candidly revealed that his brand of shop floor "democracy" was little more than a gimmick: "Workers are more likely to develop anger at an unseen power than at someone whom they have seen and, perhaps, spoken to. At the least, workers must know there is some accessibility to an authority figure—even the illusion of accessibility makes them feel they are worthy individuals, that they are part of the action."

I had the following conversation with the worker who had talked about 'rallying' around Dauch in 1994-95:

"Under capitalism, workers have no say in the corporate decisions that affect the lives of millions of people," I said.

The worker acknowledged this, replying, "This decision was made twenty years ago in some GM corporate boardroom. They decided to give these plants to Dauch in order to cut costs and the union supported it."

He went on: "Big business had a long-term plan to weaken the unions. They gave the union leaders appointed jobs and then everything changed when [former UAW International President] Doug Fraser joined the board of directors at Chrysler. The last

contract they called a one-and-a-half day strike—which did nothing to American Axle—and then handed us a two-page booklet of contract ‘highlights’ before the vote in order to push through concessions.”

I pointed out, “In the contracts with GM, Ford and Chrysler, the UAW handed over the gains of generations of workers. In return the union bureaucracy took control of a \$55 billion retiree health care trust fund, one of the largest private investment funds in America.”

“Is the union anything but a business out to protect itself?” he asked rhetorically. Referring to the union’s control of the health care trust fund, he argued, “Within ten years there won’t be any health care benefits for retirees, not with everyone’s hand in the cookie jar.”

Disgust with the UAW is widespread among American Axle workers. Willie, a worker with 13 years, observed, “The UAW wasn’t created to side with the companies. They are supposed to be for the members and fight for our rights against management. But the UAW has become a corporation. Now they have a \$55 billion. They will be working for the banks and big investors, not the people.

“When I first hired in, I thought the union was for us. But over the years I came to realize that management was only able to get away with what it did because the union was on their side.”

He then asked, “How do we win this strike?”

That led to the following exchange, as I attempted to answer his question:

—First the isolation of this struggle must be broken and workers should organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the union, to expand the strike to all other auto workers. This is not a struggle against just one employer, however. The working class is in a struggle against the entire capitalist system and the two big business parties that defend it. For that a political movement of the working class has to be built.

—What do you mean by a political struggle? Do you go to the floor of Congress and try to change the minds of the people who hold the power?

—Appeals to the Democrats—like Clinton and Obama—or the Republicans are fruitless because they answer to the same corporations attacking the working class. Workers have no political voice through these two big business parties. Did we have a chance to vote on going to war in Iraq? Do workers get to vote on the destruction of their jobs?

—No, of course not. But what kind of political movement do you mean? How do you build it?

—That is the most important question. You have to unite working people on the basis of a common program that defends their interests. The aim of such a movement must be to fight for political power—so the priorities of society are set by working people, instead of by the wealthy elite.

—But what about NAFTA? Aren’t we going through all of this because of the trade agreement with Mexico?

—It is true that companies are moving to Mexico and other low-wage countries. But outsourcing to lower-wage regions began before NAFTA was passed in 1994. As early as the 1960s auto parts production was being shifted to non-union plants in the southern US.

The response of the UAW to the attacks of the global auto companies is not to fight for the unity of auto workers around the world, but join with the American auto bosses to denounce “foreign workers” and “unfair trade,” and at the same time to impose ever lower wages on workers in the US in the name of being “competitive.” The irony is that many European companies like Volkswagen are now relocating to the US because they can pay an American worker \$10 an

hour less than a German auto worker.

Workers in every country have to unite in common struggle against the global auto companies.

In the course of this discussion and others our explanation of a socialist alternative to capitalism provoked thoughtful responses. There were, as one might expect, workers still held back by the anti-communist propaganda of the UAW, the media and big business politicians. However, the experiences of the past decade—from the corporate criminality at Enron and the sub-prime mortgage crisis to the war in Iraq and the staggering accumulation of wealth at the top of American society—have had their impact in discrediting capitalism.

We posed this to workers on the picket line: Why should these vast industrial assets—built up by generations of workers—be the personal property of Dauch and others who are only concerned with enriching themselves? The auto industry should be put under public ownership and be run for the common good, not private profit.

Such an idea seemed logical to a number of the picketers. There was something terribly wrong, it seemed to them, about the fact that such irresponsible individuals should have the power to make life-and-death decisions affecting millions. The tragic consequences of this are all too apparent to workers in Detroit, the “Motor City,” which has been decimated by the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs over the last three decades.

Now their employer—who makes \$179,000 a week—is telling them he can’t afford to pay them more than a poverty wage.

The views expressed by American Axle workers point to the growing mood of opposition in the working class. There is skepticism towards all the institutions that uphold the social order: the corporate and political establishment, the media and the trade unions.

There are still a great many political questions to be clarified. The problems of consciousness created by decades of betrayals by the union bureaucracy cannot be overcome by spontaneous struggles, no matter how militant. The bitter experiences over the last decade and a half are moving workers to the left. There will be future shocks, and these, along with the conscious intervention of socialists, will create the conditions for the development of a powerful new political movement of the working class.



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