

Australian car workers speak on GM strike

"International competitiveness is the program of every government"

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The World Socialist Web Site is interviewing auto workers throughout the world about the General Motors strike in the United States and the ongoing restructuring and consolidation of the global auto industry. The WSWs hopes to encourage a dialogue between workers internationally to facilitate a common political response to the assault on jobs, working conditions and living standards. We urge workers to e-mail their comments to editor@wsws.org

WSWS reporters recently spoke to two car workers in Melbourne, Australia about the implications of the GM strike. JW has worked at the GM engine plant at Fishermans Bend in Melbourne for nearly 20 years. The plant makes four-cylinder engines, mostly for export to Daewoo in South Korea and to Indonesia, as well as supplying four-, six- and eight-cylinder motors to the GM assembly plant at Elizabeth, near Adelaide, in South Australia.

WSWS: Do workers at your plant know about the strike in the US?

JW: The union has put up UAW bulletins from the Internet. These were posted by the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), but not by its vehicle division.

The bulletin put out by the Socialist Equality Party from the *World Socialist Web Site* was different from the union's. It is politically motivated, it explains the corruption of the UAW bureaucracy and the motives of what is going on.

One television show, "Foreign Correspondent," mentioned how North American industry is shifting to Mexico where workers may be paid 53 cents an hour. AC Delco, which was owned by GM, makes mainly electric parts for cars. It changed its name to Delphi and shifted to Mexico. Workers in supply companies also get much smaller wages than the actual employees at the GM plants.

The impact of GM's moves will be to increase unemployment, but to also increase profitability. The demands of the auto producers like GM are being made in every industry around the world. International competitiveness is the basic program of every national government--whether Labor or Liberal in Australia or Democrat or Republican in the US.

WSWS: What do you know about the UAW?

JW: It's a union most people wouldn't know about in Australia. It

had a very good beginning with the sit-down strikes, but then it became part of the system. It eliminated the militants from the work force. You could say the same thing about the equivalent here. The former Vehicle Builders Employees Federation (VBEF), now the Vehicle Division of the AMWU, was notorious for working with the bosses.

WSWS: What is the situation at Fishermans Bend?

JW: There has been a big decline in numbers over the last 20 years. There used to be 7,000 workers and now there are about 2,000. It's not just that various areas have been outsourced. The remaining work is done by fewer people. There has been an increase in the level of productivity. It's very sad to see the companies making increased profits and people being sacked and unemployed at the same time.

Prior to the 1990s, we used to make only several types of engines. We now make 22 varieties of engines from the same equipment. It's a big change in a short period of time and a complex operation.

The enterprise deals struck between the union and the management have brought team working into the operations. The basic point is that any wage rise will not be paid by an increased cost to the company. You pay for your own wage rise and take from Peter to pay Paul. It comes from either cutting back somewhere else, or from an increase in productivity.

We have quarterly talks with the managing director. They put up charts on the wall and give indications of efficiency of our plant. They used to compare us with Opel in Germany, when they did comparable operations.

WSWS: What is safety like in the plant?

JW: The place is brighter than before and the floors are painted. The ceiling has been painted, and there seems to be more space, but there is still poison in the air from machinery operations and the coolants they use. There's not as much as there used to be, but it's still there.

If you walk through the machine operations there is a fine mist in the air, sometimes a heavy mist. All of the overhead pipes, girders and beams are covered in oil from this mist and this eventually drops onto the floor as droplets. This environment must cause lung damage and illness.

WSWS: What changes have resulted from globalisation?

JW: Globalisation has to some extent always been there, but it's more open now. The owners of the factories weren't too sure what they really wanted at the start.

GM here used to have its own purchasing, engineering, finance

and other departments. Every company in the GM empire had this. This mirrored the situation in the corporate headquarters. What GM has done is eliminate this from its structure. Now it has got "GM World Wide Purchasing (Asian-Pacific region)".

WSWS: What effect has the crisis in Asia had?

JW: The main work we do is in supplying Daewoo with four-cylinder engines. They have decreased their order after the financial collapse and now we are being told to have nine days off in July. If they ended their orders, we would close down here. Anything the company needed would either be outsourced or given to the plants in Adelaide.

In the past, people have had to take their leave when there was a decline in work. GM also shut down the afternoon shift and combined it with the day shift.

SP has worked in the body shop at Toyota's Altona assembly plant in Melbourne since 1995.

WSWS: What have workers at the Altona plant heard about the GM strikes in the US?

SP: The first real information came from the leaflets distributed at the plant by the Socialist Equality Party. As usual, little is said about the struggle of workers in other countries. There has been virtually no coverage in the mass media. But it's not only the media that says nothing, it's also the policy of the union leadership.

There has been no information from the union about the strikes, but even if there were strikes at another car plant in Melbourne there would still be no information. Like the leaflet from the *World Socialist Web Site* explains, it is the union's policy is to keep production running smoothly, to boost productivity. As far as the union in Australia is concerned, car workers in America are rivals, not brothers.

WSWS: What are the conditions like at Altona?

SP: From the coverage of the GM strikes in Flint, it sounds like car workers in the US and Australia are facing the same situation. The Altona plant opened in 1994 as a "greenfields site" after the closure of Toyota's two previous Melbourne plants, at Dandenong and Port Melbourne.

Thousands of jobs were destroyed by means of redundancies. Most of the older workers left at that time and Toyota picked the younger workers for Altona.

When I first started they made 14 cars per hour--it's now gone up to 23 to 24 cars an hour. That's just in three years. The older workers would not be able to do the work; it is physically exhausting. Toyota times every process carefully to get maximum output from the workers and they don't leave any seconds for workers to stand around--they count our movements in seconds.

The production managers say all the time, "there is always room to improve" and that the team members have to think of the quickest and shortest way to complete the process. The managers call meetings about once a week and tell us, "We have to be a profitable company so that you can keep your jobs. We have to compete with the Koreans and with the cheaper imported cars."

Toyota made a \$60 million profit in Australia in 1997. The company boasts that we are producing the four-cylinder Camry in 21 hours and that it is the fastest assembled car in the world for that sized vehicle. But for the workers this means the production line is going faster than ever and that once we have achieved one

target they aim to go even faster. Toyota is making record profits, but for us there are more injuries, forced overtime and more pressure and stress.

WSWS: What form does the opposition of workers to this take? What is the role of the union?

SP: Workers are not happy with what is going on but they don't see any alternative. If there is some major problem on the line, if management is trying to put more work onto us on the line, then workers demand the union do something. The union holds a meeting with management and then tells workers that everything has been fixed up. They make a few cosmetic changes but they never raise the main issue that everyone is concerned about--the speedups and increases in productivity.

The union has the same view as management--that we have to have World's Best Practice and increased productivity so that we can defend Australian jobs.

WSWS: What do you think is the significance of the GM strikes?

SP: Their struggle to defend jobs and conditions is the same struggle that we face. We are always told by the company and by the union that car workers overseas are our rivals and competitors. But in reality a victory for GM workers in Flint would be a victory for car workers all over the world. The merger of Daimler and Chrysler will put even more pressure on the other auto producers to slash costs and eliminate jobs. They are in a more and more bitter and competitive struggle to dominate world markets. This means that the struggle by car workers in Flint is going to appear in every country.

WSWS: How can car workers defeat the ongoing destruction of jobs and conditions?

SP: Today cars are produced as part of a global production process which links workers together from all over the world. For the production of the Camry in Melbourne, Toyota gets its parts from Japan and America. Each part of the production process is completely dependent on the other. But despite this the auto unions are using nationalism to divide us so they can boost productivity and profits.

GM workers at Flint should see their struggle as part of the struggle of car workers around the world. We have to start to unify our struggles across national borders and develop a common political strategy in the interests of the working people.



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