

UAW convention opens as impact of GM strike widens

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The United Auto Workers national convention opened Monday as the strikes at two General Motors parts plants in Flint, Michigan reduced the automaker's North American output by 95 percent. The strikes by 9,200 workers began June 5 at the Flint Metal Center stamping plant and June 11 at Delphi Flint East, which makes sparkplugs, engine parts and instrument clusters.

The walkouts have led to the shutdown or slowdown of production at 24 of GM's 32 North American assembly plants, idling 121,500 workers. Thousands more have been laid off at 100 GM-owned and independent parts plants in the US, Mexico Canada and Singapore.

The strikes are costing GM about \$75 million a day in lost production. If the walkouts continue into mid-August, the after-tax losses on second- and third-quarter profits could total more than \$2 billion.

Indications are that the automaker is willing to take a long strike. GM management and Wall Street investors are seeking to carry out the cost-cutting measures which have to a great extent already been imposed by GM's US rivals.

On Monday, UAW officials hinted there might be further local strikes. Negotiations are taking place at Flint's Buick City plant, which the company has pegged for closure next year, as well as at a brake plant in Dayton, Ohio and a stamping plant in Indianapolis, Indiana.

In his keynote address to the union's thirty-second constitutional convention, held in Las Vegas, UAW President Stephen Yokich declared the union would "last one day longer than GM." However his speech made clear that the union leadership does not, in principle, oppose the company's cost-cutting drive.

Yokich rejected GM's claim that the Flint strike arose from the company's need to become leaner and

more competitive. Implicitly accepting this goal, the company's basic premise for downsizing, Yokich centered his attack on charges that GM had violated its agreement to invest in plants where the union cooperated in tearing up work rules and increasing productivity.

Yokich and other UAW officials cited the union's relations with Ford and Chrysler as a model of labor-management cooperation. UAW Vice-President Richard Shoemaker, who heads the union's GM department, told reporters, "The other two companies, once they enter into an agreement with us, they keep it. Each one of the companies is constantly striving to improve its competitiveness, and we understand that."

It is highly significant that the union officials point favorably to Ford and Chrysler, since the two automakers have cut their work forces in half since 1978, eliminating 141,000 jobs. In essence, the union officials are appealing to GM to work with the UAW to cut labor costs. Such a policy reflects the interests not of rank-and-file workers, but rather an attempt to defend the privileges of the union bureaucracy.

The hypocrisy of the UAW officials was underscored by the variety of multimedia exhibits dedicated to UAW-GM cooperation on display at the union convention. As the Wall Street Journal reported, "The display includes larger-than-life sketches of the faces of Richard Shoemaker ... and his GM counterpart, Vice President Gerald Knechtel. Between the sketches, a television screen features videos in which they speak of cooperation and how working together will help GM meet its goal of becoming more competitive. Near the multimedia stand, workers were testing laser lights that beamed UAW and GM logos on the floor."

The feelings of workers on the picket lines in Flint were very different. A striker at the Delphi Flint East

complex told the World Socialist Web Site, “This ‘jointness’ process has failed. That’s why we are here carrying these picket signs. They’ve had us fooled with that for years. Back in the 1970s I was one of those workers who were smashing Toyotas in the parking lot. Management and the union told us the Japanese were our enemies and that we had to join with GM to fight them. Now we are making parts for Japanese automakers and I don’t feel that way anymore.

“But the UAW officials have never repudiated their policy and I never expect them to do so. In fact, they don’t even want us talking to reporters on the picket line, especially if we have something bad to say about the UAW International.”

Another worker with 33 years at the Flint Metal Center added, “Back in the 1930s when the workers carried out the sit-down strikes, the union had some power. Then in the 1970s they got in bed with management with this ‘partnership’ stuff. The union got weaker and now we have to fight again. The union leaders were more concerned with their careers than with the jobs and concerns of the members.

“GM and these other big companies think they are in the driver’s seat. They are abusing workers and just looking for the big dollars. That is why we are out here fighting.”



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