

Metal Center strike in sixth day

New GM strike threat in Flint

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Striking workers at Flint, Michigan metal fabricating plant

As the strike by workers at a GM metal fabricating plant enters its sixth day, and the auto giant has been forced to close assembly plants throughout North America due to a lack of parts, workers at another key GM facility are scheduled to walk out Thursday at 7 p.m. The plant, Delphi Automotive Systems Flint East, makes parts used in most GM vehicles, including engine components such as spark plugs and air filters, as well as electronic parts such as cruise control systems. A combined strike by workers at the two Flint parts plants could force the shutdown of all 32 of GM's assembly plants in the US, Canada and Mexico.

The June 5 walkout by 3,400 members of United Auto Workers Local 659 has already had a severe impact on GM. To date some 17,300 workers have been laid off at GM plants in Michigan, Ohio, Kansas, Ontario and New Jersey. More layoffs are being announced daily. On Wednesday GM shut its Linden, New Jersey assembly plant that makes the popular Chevrolet S-10 and GMC Sonoma pickups as well as the Chevrolet Blazer and GMC Jimmy sport utility vehicle. The plant employs 2,360 workers.

Negotiations continued Wednesday, with top union officials, including UAW Vice President Richard Shoemaker, taking part in the talks. The present strike is the latest in a series of local strikes over the past several years.

The immediate issues in the strike include health and safety, speed-up, outsourcing and staffing. But these local issues are overshadowed by GM's continued

threat to wipe out thousands of jobs in Flint, the birthplace of the UAW. Recently GM announced plans to close the Buick City assembly plant employing 2,700 workers. Since the late 1970s GM has eliminated over 50,000 jobs in the city. Another 11,000 are threatened.

The Flint Metal Center itself has been threatened by GM. The company claims the plant is among its least efficient and is demanding changes in work rules as a precondition for further investment. Many of the workers are older and nearing retirement age, yet they are being continuously pushed to increase output.

GM is determined to bring its costs into line with the other major auto producers by eliminating thousands of jobs. Its willingness to provoke strikes has drawn praise from auto industry analysts who see it as a sign that management is serious about increasing productivity. One auto industry analyst quoted in the *Detroit News* said of GM's decision to take a strike at the Flint Metal Center, "They're in a very competitive business," she said. "A high-cost producer loses. And this is definitely not one of their more productive factories."

The World Socialist Web Site spoke with workers on the picket line. A worker with 43 years told the WSW, "It is frightening what is happening and the way it is being handled by the UAW. You ask anyone here what they are on strike for and I doubt very many could tell you. The union is not doing its job. I predict that it will be a long strike and we will go back with less than they offered at the beginning. GM bought three companies in 1985: EDS, Hughes and the UAW.

"These big companies are buying these smaller companies just to break them up. They keep skimming the profits off the top. They ask workers for concessions and then they close the doors.

"You had 78,000 GM workers in Flint in 1982 and they are down to 28,000 now. Within the next two

years you will be down to half that again. Here we are in an economy they tell us is flourishing and every day we are losing jobs. The rich keep getting richer.'

A worker with 20 years told the WSWS, 'It will take a lot more people than just the UAW to stop this, because the UAW is losing a lot of members.'

'I was at the truck plant originally and then I was moved to Pontiac. After that I went to the van plant. When they shut production at the van plant, I moved here. GM is not a good place to work. They are downsizing so much I don't think our kids are going to have jobs. Flint depends mostly on GM jobs. Besides the GM plants there are the smaller suppliers that handle a lot of GM jobs. A lot of workers will be bumped to other plants. Flint will be a ghost town.'

'I don't know what the UAW can do about it. GM's attitude is: if you don't do it our way we will close down and move to Mexico. It would probably take something big, like what happened in Indonesia, for things to change.'

A skilled trades worker with 13 years said, 'Downsizing affects everybody. I hate to see Buick City go, that's a lot of jobs that will be taken. The plant is a landmark in the city. Closing it is taking a part of Flint's heritage. It is going to affect everyone. I think there is quite a bit of support around here for our strike right now.'

See Also:

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[10 June 1998]

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[January 1998]



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