

Strikes threaten to halt GM's North American operations

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The strikes by 9,200 workers at two General Motors parts plants in Flint, Michigan have idled another 63,000 workers at 13 assembly plants and 67 additional parts plants throughout North America. Negotiators for GM and the United Auto Workers union met on Monday and Tuesday with no progress reported.

If no settlement is reached by Wednesday or Thursday, sources quoted by the *Wall Street Journal* said, it would make little sense for GM to get its factories back into production before the two-week shutdown for model changeover that is scheduled for the end of next week. Moreover, top UAW officials will be at the union's national convention in Las Vegas by the weekend.

Analysts estimate that GM's North American production will come to a halt by Friday if no agreement is reached, costing the world's largest auto maker \$65 million a day. As a result the US Gross Domestic Product would drop \$2 billion by the end of June.

The shutdowns include GM's operations in Canada and Mexico. Assembly plants in Oshawa, Ontario and St. Therese, Quebec have been forced to close. About 16,300 workers in 25 GM plants in Mexico have been sent home or assigned new tasks. GM employs 72,000 workers at 53 Delphi Automotive Systems parts plants in Mexico, making it the largest private employer in the country.

Thirty-four hundred workers, members of UAW Local 659, began the walkout on June 5 at GM's Metal Center, curtailing the auto maker's supply of hoods, fenders and other parts. They were joined June 11 by 5,800 workers at the Delphi Flint East plant, members of UAW Local 651, who produce spark plugs, oil filters, speedometers and instrument clusters used in virtually every GM car and truck produced in the US,

Canada and Mexico.

While chronic understaffing, speedup and health and safety conditions at the two plants have been cited, auto workers are most concerned about halting GM's destruction of jobs, not just for current employees, but also for the next generation of workers. In the last two decades, GM has eliminated 50,000 jobs in Flint and plans to eliminate 11,000 more, including 2,700 at the Buick Assembly plant, which is scheduled to close in September 1999.

About 100,000 of GM's hourly employees in the US will reach retirement age by 2003. GM wants to use attrition to scale back its work force to 175,000 or less. In addition to production workers, tens of thousands of engineers and other professional workers, not represented by the UAW, face downsizing.

Like its global competitors, GM is slashing jobs and shuttering facilities in order to cut costs and increase productivity and profitability. The world auto industry confronts a crisis of overcapacity. The recent merger by Daimler Benz and Chrysler is part of a consolidation of the industry which threatens the jobs of hundreds of thousands of auto workers in the Americas, Europe and Asia.

For the past six years, GM management has sought to consolidate its Delphi Automotive Systems by closing down and selling off unprofitable plants. According to the industry magazine *Automotive News*, the Flint East plant was one of a dozen parts facilities put on GM's list of "problem plants." GM assigned one of its top managers as a "plant doctor" to Flint East. According to one salaried employee, the manager told workers, "My job is to show you how to save yourself, or we will shut you down." GM has warned workers that it wants to reduce the work force from 5,800 to 3,000.

The leaders of UAW Local 651 spent 18 months

working out a plan with GM management to make the Flint East complex more profitable. They told the rank and file that work rule concessions and other sacrifices were necessary to save jobs. Even in the midst of the strike, UAW officials are permitting an unspecified number of UAW members to continue working at the plant to serve non-GM customers.

Striking workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that GM wants to shut down sections of the Flint East complex, or the entire facility. One worker said, “They want to keep the most profitable sections and sell the Davison Road complex that produces oil filters. It is not attached to the main plant and it’s easier to close that way. In 1977 we had 16,000 workers in this complex, now it’s less than 6,000.

“The plant made \$84 million last year and is projected to make \$110 million this year. But they are still threatening to reduce us to 600 jobs by the year 2,000. It takes 25 to 30 years seniority to hold on to a job around here.”

Another worker said, “This is more than a local issue, this is about job security. The company is only concerned with boosting its profit returns. All they have on the board of directors are a bunch of bankers. Anyone who was an engineer they got rid of. We need to win this strike not just for ourselves, but for the future.”



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