

Discussions with General Motors strikers in Flint, Michigan

Workers grapple with the impact of globalization

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Strikes at two General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan have led to the virtual shutdown of the auto company's North American operations. This confrontation, between workers in one of the traditional strongholds of the United Automobile Workers and one of the world's largest transnational firms, has farreaching implications. Workers want to defend their jobs and living standards, as well as the jobs and living standards of future generations. GM seeks the unrestricted right to eliminate jobs, increase productivity and shift work to take advantage of cheaper labor elsewhere.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* have visited the picket lines in Flint to discuss issues raised by the strike. We wanted to know what strikers thought about the global auto industry, the role of the UAW, the future of their plants and of Flint itself, and, more generally, social conditions in America.

It should be noted first that the hold of the bureaucracy over the auto workers is unquestionably weakening. This is reflected in the important correspondence the *WSWS* has received from workers by e-mail. And it is reflected in the willingness of strikers to enter into conversations on the picket line. Redbaiting has been at a minimum, and the UAW bureaucracy's efforts to choke off political discussion have been largely unsuccessful. At one of the gates of the metal fabricating plant a picket captain refused to let *WSWS* reporters distribute material or speak to pickets. This has been the exception. In fact, at one Delphi East plant gate a picket captain told our reporter quite frankly that the union had banned strikers talking to journalists 'because the UAW International doesn't want us to say anything bad about them.'

What are the issues that come up in the discussions that take place? On a recent Saturday two *WSWS* reporters spoke to pickets at one of the gates of the metal fabricating plant, while passing motorists energetically blew their horns in solidarity. There were perhaps 15 people there, including two female employees from a local GM auto dealership who had come to show their support. Most of the strikers were in their forties or older. Indeed the first picket I spoke to had worked at GM for 42 years; he was playing with his granddaughter. A number of the workers, some considerably younger than that first man, were also grandfathers. No one had less than 20 years at the company. These are workers who have been around the block a few times.

The attitude toward the company was predictably harsh. 'They lied to us,' was a recurring refrain. After promising to invest heavily in the plant, GM executives reneged on the pledge, claiming that the workers' productivity had not increased sufficiently. Greg, a 21-year veteran, told us: 'GM isn't living up to what it said it was going to do. They said they were going to invest \$300 million and they haven't done it. Look, they built a foundation, they poured concrete, and then they stopped. They got the word, no more money to be spent here. The company says we didn't live up to what we said we were going to do; that there are too many

disciplinary problems, people going home early, and so on.'

Strikers see GM's actions in Flint as an expression of company executives' dishonesty, greed and ruthlessness. 'It's the big corporations; it's greed, money, power,' as one 30-year veteran described it. Greg spoke with astonishment about the salaries of company executives. 'The chairman of GM is getting 7.1 million dollars a year. 7.1 million. If I had 7 million dollars, I'd retire. And he makes that every year! What's wrong with them? Why do they want more all the time?'

The reality of a global auto industry is beginning to become part of workers' thinking. Inevitably, however, especially given the union's nationalist and chauvinist policies with which the rank and file have been bombarded, there is confusion over the issue. Some pickets referred somewhat disdainfully to the Mexican workers, viewing them as virtual strikebreakers willing to work for anything and, in effect, stealing Flint workers' jobs. At the same time, there were many expressions of sympathy, sometimes from the very same individuals, about the conditions faced by auto workers south of the border.

This contradictory attitude was summed up by a crane operator who noted that his 'Mexican brothers' were working for two dollars a day, but then added, 'We shouldn't have Mexican brothers to begin with.' That led to the following exchange:

--What do you mean?

--Well, they shouldn't have shipped our jobs down there.

--But the global character of the auto industry is a reality. You can't shut the borders.

--No, but you have to fight to save jobs here.

--How can you do that when they can close down here and find cheaper labor somewhere else? There's a global economy, the question is, in whose interests is it going to be operated, those of working people or those of a handful of billionaires?

--Well, that's why we're out here.

Greg, too, expressed this sort of ambivalence. Our conversation began with his asserting at some length the superiority of Flint workmanship over that of every other auto plant, and, more generally, the superiority of Big Three auto production over that of all of their nonunion and foreign counterparts.

He noted that the auto companies had shifted their parts work to nonunion plants, but now 'Ford wants to get it back. Because they're not getting quality. They were making a bracket for us at some other place. At first they produced a good bracket. Then they sent it to a cheaper shop, and a cheaper, and eventually we got junk. It wouldn't do the job. The same with frames they were building in Mexico. They fell apart....'

After he had gone on in this vein for several minutes, I politely interrupted and said, 'Look, I don't know whether you build the best cars in Flint or not. I don't think it's the issue. The car industry is worldwide.

Like it or not, there are auto workers in Mexico, Korea, Germany, and so on. In many cases, you're facing the same companies. What's the difference between an auto worker in Flint or in Mexico or in Korea? Don't they have the same problems?

Greg agreed in principle. 'Oh sure, I think all the workers here and everywhere should get together, they should all be unionized. I mean, GM exploits people in Mexico. They exploit them, they abuse them, they poison their water. They pay them two dollars a day, and they're happy to get it.'

I said I didn't think workers in Mexico were any happier than the pickets there in Flint. He replied, 'I was happy! The company has done this to us. We didn't do it.'

The union bureaucracy has staunchly promoted chauvinism and American nationalism. Outside the UAW Local 599 union hall in Flint one union official demanded that WSWs reporters driving up in a Mazda get that 'Jap car out of our parking lot.' He blamed the loss of thousands of jobs at Buick City and the plant's possible closure--to prevent which the UAW has not lifted a finger--on the Japanese. He threatened to have the car towed away until he noted the sticker which identified it as having been assembled in Flat Rock, Michigan.

In contrast to that, one picket captain at the Delphi East plant observed, 'I used to be one of those guys smashing Toyotas and Japanese cars. That's all we heard from the union and the media, that they were taking our jobs. Today, I'm making parts for Japanese auto companies.'

The globally integrated character of the economy creates conditions for a new relationship between US, Latin American, European and Asian workers, and the possibility of more critical and politically conscious attitudes among American workers toward US imperialist interventions. The hollowness and duplicity of patriotic appeals under present conditions, in which workers in a variety of countries may be working on the same end product, ought to become obvious. But there is the legacy of flag-waving and militarism, encouraged by the AFL-CIO, to be overcome.

One individual who wrote into the WSWs recently described himself as 'infuriated by the evening world news tonight seeing all the auto industry going to Mexico and China. I am also a Vietnam veteran and I fought for this country and to see it being handed over to foreign countries is just appalling. I am curious as to why the UAW doesn't launch a major campaign to all Americans with any patriotism left in them at all to completely boycott General Motors!'

The young men who were sent to fight and, in many cases, die in Vietnam or the Persian Gulf were told that they were fighting for the 'American way of life.' In fact, these wars were conducted to advance the interests of American big business and to bring those regions of the world under US political and economic sway. A principal concern of the US government in regard to poor and underdeveloped countries, such as Mexico, is to ensure that they remain havens of cheap labor. Washington maintains the closest relations with the Mexican government and entirely approves of attacks that take place on workers there. When this was pointed out to one Flint striker, he acknowledged that it was true, that workers had been sold a bill of goods.

In regard to the UAW, the attitudes of strikers vary. There are workers close to the union, who feel they have benefited from its policies. That is a distinctly minority opinion. For the most part, workers' views of the UAW range from disinterest to open distrust and disdain. These are workers who have lived through the transformation of the union into a thoroughly corporatist organization, a body that has elevated labor-management collaboration into its guiding principle. What do they make of this change?

There is a good deal of unclarity on the issue. While there is a general perception that the union and the company are 'in bed' together, it is seen by many as a more or less natural or inevitable process, forced on the UAW by changes in the character of the industry. Greg started at GM in

1977. He told me, 'When I first got here there was a lot of labor-management antagonism. 'Up the worker' and all that. Management would bust you. There was a lot of conflict. Then the union went along with the concessions [in the early 1980s].' He implied that the disruptive practices of the 1970s hadn't worked in the long run, and now it was all brotherly love between union and company--and that didn't work either.

Other strikers felt that while the UAW had closely collaborated with management, now GM's ruthlessness had forced it into fighting. One worker commented, 'See this picket sign, that tells you how well 'jointness' has worked.'

The extraordinary tension building up beneath the surface of American society also made itself felt at the picket line. The crane operator we spoke to asked me at one point, 'Were you in the service? I was in the Marine Corps. I don't believe in killing anybody, but.... Sometimes I understand how Ted Kaczynski felt, you know, the Unabomber. I'm not advocating what he did. But everything is corporate and out of control.'

'Let me give you an example. I finished here late one night, in the pouring rain. I drove out of the parking lot and my driver's side windshield wiper flew off. I had nothing but a metal rod going back and forth. I drove around to four gas stations, none of them had a windshield wiper. They had food, groceries, everything else. Do you remember in the old days when you pulled in and the guy would come out and say, 'Can I check your oil?' That doesn't exist any longer. The little man is being squeezed out.'

How is it possible that a worker who belongs to supposedly one of the most powerful labor organizations in the world feels so utterly isolated and helpless, as though the life were being crushed out of him, and finds himself susceptible to what can only be described, without stretching the point, as anarchistic or terroristic moods? One has to hold the UAW principally responsible.

One senses on the picket line a certain resignation in regard to the future of GM's operations in Flint. Many workers acknowledged the fear that the company was simply going to close down its facilities altogether. This is not a strike in which pickets indulge very much in bluster and fist-pumping. Flint has lost 40,000 auto jobs in the past two decades, and GM as a whole has eliminated 125,000 workers since 1987. What would happen to Flint if these plants closed their doors? 'The mayor says we'll be fine,' Greg commented, 'I think Flint will be a ghost town.' The resignation workers express contains a healthy dose of realism. They don't any longer believe the promises of the company, the politicians or the UAW.

Workers seem to have a particular difficulty grasping the objectively driven character of the changes taking place both in the auto industry and the UAW, and the relation of those changes to the state of society as a whole. There is an acceptance, by and large, of the foundations of the profit system. Very few challenge at this point the notion that the precondition for a decent living standard is the profitability of the company. As Greg told me, 'We're reasonable. We know the company has to get smaller. But this is a profitable plant. We do good work.'

Greg referred to one of the problems--a fear of or animosity toward socialism and communism among this layer of workers. He said, 'Look at the situation in this country. We should have national health care. It's ridiculous. But that brings up the s-word, socialism. You say things like that, people say you're a communist.'

At the same time, however, there is an instinctive hostility for Wall Street and the policies of the large corporations. Some pickets spoke bitterly about the continuous pressure of the large investors on GM management. One worker said, 'This company is run by the stockholders. They are millionaires, the same ones that run the country.' One skilled trades worker at the metal fabricating plant commented, 'They say Wall Street isn't happy. But who's running things? I've never seen anyone from Wall Street down here working in the plant. Who's running things?' When I suggested that this was indeed a central question, he paused and seemed

disturbed. 'It's a big issue,' he went on. 'There are no easy answers. I sure don't have the answer.'

In the most general sense, one could say that the discussions in Flint reveal the way in which the massive changes in the world economy are slowly beginning to work their way into the thinking of wide layers of the working class. The great difficulty at this point is that while Flint workers increasingly grasp or feel the impotence of their present organization, the UAW, they don't yet see or have confidence in an alternative.

This crisis of perspective is primarily the product of decades of anticommunism, chauvinism and class collaboration on the part of the US labor movement. Without the understanding that within contemporary society there are definite social classes, principally the working class and the capitalist class, whose interests are mutually opposed, it is impossible for workers to make any headway, because they still accept the premises that are the very condition of their exploitation.

Despite the difficulties, a process has begun. The discussions in Flint give proof of a more serious consideration of social issues, and a willingness to criticize past assumptions. To this point the shift has a largely negative character: a movement away from previously held conceptions and illusions, without the emergence of something positive to replace them. But this is a necessary transition. Only out of this crisis, with the confusion that inevitably accompanies it, will a genuine development in political understanding emerge.

Such a development will not be the automatic product of the immediate struggles of the working class. For that the intervention of a class-conscious, socialist movement is required. The WSWS will play an instrumental role in that process. The potential exists for a considerable leap forward in the coming period. In this process, while workers with decades in the factories--like those in Flint--will no doubt play their parts, it will be the younger generation, those only now entering the work force, who will inevitably assume the leading role.

See Also:

GM presses ahead with restructuring plans

[8 July 1998]

GM plans to bypass struck plants and resume production of key models

[3 July 1998]



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