

British GM workers speak on US strike, working conditions

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Reporters from the WSWs travelled to the Vauxhall plant in Luton, one of two GM plants in the UK, to speak to workers about the strike in the US and about the conditions they face in Britain. Vauxhall is located on the outskirts of London and is one of Luton's major employers. The plant is an enormous castle-like structure and is surrounded by many smaller factories making car components.

Vauxhall Motors Limited built its first car in Luton in 1905 and was bought by GM in 1925. The company is closely integrated into GM's European operations. With an average work force of just under 10,000 people, it produced 277,888 vehicles in 1996, exporting 47 percent of this total.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers at the end of their shift. About half had heard of the GM strike in Flint, mostly from CNN. Others had read the WSWs leaflets handed out at the plant. Their comments show that although some workers see the need for international solidarity with car workers overseas they presently have little understanding of how this could be achieved.

Younger workers who stopped were often aware of the failure of the old trade union methods of struggle and were receptive to an internationalist alternative. Amongst older workers the betrayals of the past had left their mark and they were harder to convince of the need for a struggle based on internationalism.

A common remark was that the union was not doing enough. Although this comment reveals dissatisfaction with the union, underlying it is a belief that this is still a means through which jobs and conditions can be defended. However, out of the dozens of workers who stopped, only one explicitly defended the union.

Workers tended to underestimate the impact of the globalisation of production. They saw it either as leading to overproduction, or as an excuse for productivity drives, as was the case in this year's pay deal in which the union agreed to jobs being sacrificed and productivity increased. The agreement involved a below-inflation pay award of 3.5 percent for the first year, lower wage rates and fewer holidays for new employees, outsourcing of component parts production to contractors, the introduction of flexible working and a three-shift system for the first time.

In another unprecedented move agreed to by the union, future

pay increases were tied to the pound's exchange rate against the German mark. The company threatened the closure of their British plants unless these measures were accepted, and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), fell into line.

'We should have one big union'

WSWS spoke to Robert, a worker in his late 40s.

WSWS: What do you think of the need for an international struggle by car workers?

Robert: We can't do much over here until the unions make clear to English workers what is going on. We only know what we read in the papers, or see on the TV. The English unions must be waiting for the OK from the union hierarchy.

WSWS: But do you think the unions would unite workers internationally?

Robert: It's open to conjecture. All the different unions here have different bosses. There's too many big chiefs, we need to lose the big chiefs. Their hands are tied. You can't just walk out on strike. The Tory government prevented that, the situation we're in is going back to the 30s.

WSWS: What do you see as the impact of globalisation?

Robert: In the next 10 to 15 years we'll have to stop making cars. There are too many cars, too much pollution. Cars were only required to have catalytic converters in the last few years. Illness from exhaust fumes is up 40 percent. There's an asthma epidemic. We're not told about other parts of the world, this is the trouble. We've got no idea what happens in other car companies. This is a poor reflection on the unions.

WSWS: What do you think of international unity?

Robert: This is the only way to go. All the carmakers have all their eggs in one basket. We should have one big union.

'The union says Germany is the enemy'

WSWS spoke to Barry, a worker in his late 20s.

WSWS: What do you think of the strike in America against job losses?

Barry: It's a trend, GM are slowing down and it's going to happen here. They've got a hidden agenda. It started off around

this year's pay deal. I believe that the threats they made to close the plant, around the pay deal, were just to push through the deal. Before, there was little work, no overtime. Now we're working harder than ever before, there's overtime on Fridays and Saturdays. One hundred people are going from production this year; 400 have already gone, by what they call voluntary redundancy. My team leader said that the company wanted to increase productivity even more.

WSWS: What are the unions doing?

Barry: That's a bit difficult. They had a meeting around the pay deal. Half of the workers booed the union. They don't have much clout, they go along with all the company crap.

WSWS: Do you think workers should unify internationally?

Barry: It's a great idea but I can't say I see it coming. There was a strike in Germany, and there was a lot of talk about supporting them in some way, but it never came to anything. Some stewards supported this. If the union pushed for it we'd go along with it. But the union says Germany is the enemy. Some German engineers were sent to work on some robots here. The union told everyone they were sabotaging the robots so that they [the German plants] would get new models. Compared to 10 years ago, we used to have strikes every few days, even about little things like air conditioning. Now it all goes by.

WSWS: How did you hear about the GM strike?

Barry: A leaflet like this. One of the blokes is really enthusiastic about it. He's stuck a leaflet up on the notice board, and is telling everyone to read it; everyone agrees with it.

'The union is not strong enough'

Another young worker had already read the WSWS leaflet about the strike. When asked whether workers needed to start thinking and acting globally, he said, 'exactly, because it's a global company.'

An older worker remarked that workers in countries like Hungary and Poland (to which the big car companies are relocating) would not go on strike, because of the high levels of unemployment. He saw this as preventing an international struggle succeeding. On the question of job losses, he argued that the multinational companies, to the detriment of the workers, had used computers and robots, and he saw this as an inevitable result of new technology.

It is not surprising, after decades of unprecedented assaults on jobs, in which the big capitalists have used new technology to weaken the position of the working class, that the technology itself is seen as a hostile force. This view is strengthened by the unions, which claim that job losses are an inevitable result of new technology, and that all that can be done is to lessen the impact by pressing for them to be made through early retirement and voluntary redundancies.

Another older worker said, 'I know they are doing the same thing all over the world: getting rid of jobs through early

retirement, and other ways. But people here just accept it, because the union is not strong enough to fight against it'.

Noting that the union had changed over the course of his working life, another said, 'They're more on the side of management now, they don't do anything when you've got a complaint. They used to be more militant, but now they are not. So people say, 'Well, we'll have to let the company get on with it, even though they are getting rid of jobs.'

Many workers complained about conditions in the car plant. Two 17-year-old apprentices explained that all they did all day was insert one screw in one part of a car. The next minute they did the same again in the next car. 'We don't want to do that all our lives.'

A woman who had worked at the plant for many years complained bitterly that she was being forced to go into work the next day for 15 minutes, from 6 in the morning until 6.15, before getting five hours off for a hospital appointment. She had notified management of this three weeks earlier. She explained how, in response to her complaints, 'one of the managers came down to the assembly line and started shouting and bawling at me in front of everyone.' She said she was happy for her words to be put on the web site, but was concerned that her name should not appear for fear of management reprisals.

After the other Vauxhall workers had left, a number of contract workers came out. They work in the kitchens, and as cleaners. A number of them looked at the leaflet but said that it had nothing to do with them and handed it back, since they were contractors. Two contractors who did want to discuss the issues explained that they only received a part of what GM gave to the agency that employed them. They received £5 an hour, and £7 as an overtime rate at weekends. 'There are about 15 of us from the agency working here. They explained that some workers had believed the contractors were on a higher rate than they were and this had caused friction.'

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[21 July 1998]

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[29 April 1998]



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