

Court to monitor arbitration in US auto strike

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General Motors and the United Auto Workers began an arbitration hearing Wednesday on the legality of the local strikes in Flint, which have paralyzed the automaker's North American operations, with a federal judge threatening to enforce an arbitrator's decision with an unprecedented back-to-work injunction.

US District Judge Paul Gadola Jr. issued a court order Tuesday requiring GM and the UAW to proceed with the arbitration hearing before Thomas Roberts, who has served as umpire for GM-UAW contract disputes since 1987. The order was legally redundant, since both the company and the union had already agreed to the procedure.

GM sought the order, and Gadola obliged, in order to add the sanction of the federal courts to whatever decision Roberts renders. Gadola warned that he could impose contempt of court penalties if either side attempts to 'thwart, impede, delay or prolong the arbitration process.'

Roberts began taking testimony from the company and the union shortly after 9:00 a.m. at the Atheneum Hotel in Detroit. He will hold two days of hearings in Detroit, then shift to Flint for two more days of testimony, if necessary. This timetable, spurred on by the judge's warnings against delay, could produce a decision by early next week.

If the arbitrator finds that the local strikes are over national rather than local issues, the judge could issue a federal injunction ordering an immediate return to work, and GM would be entitled to seek damages for the huge losses caused by the strike, expected to top \$2 billion by the end of the week.

Gadola's warning against any attempt to 'thwart ... the arbitration process' is directed not only at the union bureaucracy--which has repeatedly pledged to abide by an arbitration decision to end the strikes--but against any section of auto workers who might seek to continue the strike in defiance of the arbitrator and the union.

It is the first time that a court has taken jurisdiction over a strike at General Motors since 1937, when Judge Gadola's father--then a local judge in Flint--issued an injunction ordering an end to the historic sit-down strikes. The workers, who had seized several GM factories, defied the judge's order and the National Guard and compelled the largest US manufacturing company to recognize the union.

The central purpose of the injunction is to bring even greater pressure to bear on the union to settle the strike on the terms demanded by management, which includes both an abandonment of the Flint strikers and a commitment not to permit any further local strikes for the duration of the national contract, until September 1999.

A cover for retreat

The UAW agreed to speedy arbitration on the issue of the legality of the local strikes, despite the potential for enormous financial liability, because the union leadership seeks a political cover. Instead of taking responsibility themselves for a retreat from the current confrontation with GM, UAW officials could blame such a surrender on the intervention of the outside arbitrator or the federal judge.

General Motors is sensitive to the need to reach a resolution to the strike that leaves the UAW at least some political credibility in the eyes of the rank and file. This understanding was reflected in a column in Tuesday's *Detroit News* --the longtime editorial voice of GM--by Daniel Howes, the newspaper's senior automotive writer.

Howes called on GM Chairman John F. Smith and UAW President Stephen Yokich to meet directly and work out an agreement. 'The first step is to end the defiant posturing and start crafting a politically

palatable settlement for the union that GM's directors and critics on Wall Street can stomach,' he wrote.

Making a settlement 'politically palatable for the union' means giving Yokich & Co. a fig leaf for their collaboration with GM's drive to slash jobs and cut costs. It means preserving the ability of Solidarity House to continue acting as the instrument of the auto bosses in disciplining the auto workers and compelling them to accept the demands of Wall Street.

No middle ground

While it is possible to conceive of an agreement that gives GM what it wants while saving face for the union bureaucracy, no such middle ground exists between the company and the workers.

General Motors is pursuing a strategy of job-cutting that goes well beyond the immediate issues in Flint. An article in the current *Time* magazine on the crisis of GM cites one Wall Street analyst suggesting that 'in order to get into fighting shape, GM would have to close three assembly plants, eliminating as many as 34,500 blue-collar jobs.' Moreover, 'the company needs to close about 2,300 dealerships out of 8,500,' and scrap 27 of its models, including an entire division, such as Oldsmobile or Buick.

A recent study by Harbour and Associates, highly publicized in the Detroit-area media last week, declared that GM needed to eliminate 38,000 jobs simply to cut its labor cost per vehicle to the level of Ford, while up to 55,000 jobs would have to go for GM to match the productivity of Honda, Toyota and Nissan transplant operations in the United States.

The Flint workers, however, have stood their ground on the defense of jobs, a stand which has won growing support from the rank and file. UAW officials revealed Wednesday that a fifth major local, at the assembly plant in Janesville, Wisconsin, is seeking strike authorization from Solidarity House. UAW members at parts plants in Dayton, Ohio and Indianapolis, at the Buick City complex in Flint, and at the Saturn complex in Spring Hill, Tennessee have all voted strike authorization and sought approval for a strike from the national union.

At the same time the effects of the Flint strikes continue to spread. On Tuesday GM was forced to halt

production of the new C/K truck at the truck plant in Oshawa, Ontario, one of a handful of assembly lines still operating in North America. It was GM's removal of the dies for the new C/K truck from the Flint Metal Center and their shipment to Oshawa over the Memorial Day weekend that was the immediate spark to the local strike.

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