

Settlement near in GM strike

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The United Auto Workers leadership is nearing a deal with General Motors to end strikes at two GM parts plants in Flint, Michigan and allow the automaker to resume production at its North American operations. UAW President Stephen Yokich joined the high-level negotiations over the weekend and media reports indicate a settlement is imminent.

Any deal undoubtedly means that UAW officials have granted further concessions to increase productivity at the Flint Metal Center where GM has demanded substantial work rule changes. It also means the UAW has provided management with some sort of assurance that a settlement would not be followed by more crippling strikes at other UAW locals. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Monday that UAW Vice President Richard Shoemaker said the talks included proposals to settle other local disputes, including at two brake plants in Dayton, Ohio and a metal fabricating plant in Indianapolis, where workers have already voted to authorize strikes.

The negotiations intensified after an independent arbitrator completed his hearings into GM's charge that the Flint strikes violated the national UAW-GM contract. It is possible that UAW officials anticipated a ruling that would not only set a precedent against further local strikes but could also lead to millions of dollars in damage claims.

On the other hand, media accounts of a possible ruling unfavorable to the UAW could also have been designed to provide the UAW officials with an excuse to call off the strikes. Over the past number of weeks commentators close to the negotiations have said one of the negotiators' major concerns is to find a face-saving measure for the union while it capitulates to the company's demands.

This was essentially the reason behind GM's decision to return the metal stamping dies to the Flint plant Sunday which they removed days before the strike

began. With news cameras rolling, UAW Local 659 President Duane Zuckschwerdt at the Flint Metal Center declared, 'Those dies are back home where they're going to stay.' Union officials set up loudspeakers to play 'God Bless the USA' and pronounced that they had won the battle with GM.

The stage-managed event, however, had nothing to do with saving jobs. Similar agreements, such as the one that ended the strikes at two Dayton, Ohio plants in 1996, were hailed as victories for 'job security,' only to be followed by company announcements of plant shutdowns and layoffs. It can be safely predicted that within one or two years of this settlement, the Flint Metal Center, which industry analysts already say is on GM's chopping block, will be shut down or sold off and many more workers will lose their jobs.

As in the previous eight local strikes over the last two years, the deal the UAW is preparing will do nothing to slow down the company's downsizing and restructuring plans. From the beginning of the strike the UAW officials have openly stated they are not opposed to the company slashing jobs and becoming more 'competitive.' What the UAW has been pressing is for management to 'work with the union' to carrying through these changes.

Since the late 1970s the UAW has assisted the American Big Three automakers in implementing restructuring to better compete against their Japanese and European rivals. More than a half million auto workers lost their jobs, roughly half the work force at GM, Chrysler and Ford.

Wall Street has responded to the news of an impending settlement by bidding up GM's stock price. So confident are major investment houses that GM's directors will carry through drastic job- and cost-cutting that they are urging their clients to buy GM stock for the first time since 1992 when a boardroom coup removed company executives who were resisting the

drastic plant-closing and mass layoff strategy carried out by other US car companies.

GM's President's Council--a leading management group--will be meeting next Monday to discuss the company's reorganization. According to the *Detroit News* this includes plans to consolidate North American sales, service and marketing operations; push ahead with plans to sell at least 20 percent of GM's Delphi Automotive Systems parts unit; close at least two North American assembly plants, including St. Therese, Quebec and Baltimore, Maryland, and perhaps Lordstown, Ohio. Other candidates for closure, according to the newspaper, are the Flint Metal Center and nearby Grand Blanc stamping plants.

These moves in North America are part of a global strategy by the company which includes looking for strategic partners in Europe, and especially in Asia, to bolster its presence in 'emerging markets.' On Saturday, the company entered its bid to take over South Korea's bankrupt Kia Motors--part-owned by rival Ford--and it has already expressed interest in a deal with German automaker BMW.

Like its global competitors, GM is positioning itself for the inevitable shakeout in the industry that will result from the current glut in auto production. In the past year GM units in Germany, Belgium and the United Kingdom negotiated cost-cutting productivity agreements with the local unions and the company has increased efficiency in its Canadian plants. Moreover, GM has plans to increase investments in state-of-the-art plants in Mexico.

While GM pursues a global assault on auto workers, the UAW's 'America First' strategy has revealed itself to be nothing more than union collaboration with management in the elimination of jobs and in other cost-cutting measures.

Strikers on the picket line at the Flint Metal Center reacted to news of an imminent settlement with skepticism. An electrician told the *World Socialist Web Site*, 'We are going to lose our butts with this settlement. The history of agreements with GM has been they take more and more away each time. I give this plant five years before they close it.'

'People have no idea what is in this agreement. There may be some improvements locally, but overall, in the long term, it's going to be worse. It's scary to think that the national contract is up next year.'

'The union wants to hold on to its job base because they are concerned that more job losses will mean less union dues. Unfortunately, it's a select few that run this country, those millionaires who pay the lobbyists.'

Another worker said, 'The UAW collaborates with GM. You can see that with all the jobs that are marching out of the plant. They have an absentee program here which you cannot file any grievances against. You need to hire a lawyer to file a civil rights suit, because the union will do nothing to stop discrimination.'

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