

Letters from our readers

The General Motors strike and the working class

16 July 1998

Over the last ten days the World Socialist Web Site has received a large number of letters from readers commenting on the GM strike, from a wide range of viewpoints. Below we publish a number of these letters. A few have been excerpted for reasons of space. The issues raised in these letters will be the subject of future comment from the WSWS.

Workers around the world can send in their comments and questions, and share their own experiences and problems with their fellow workers, via the World Socialist Web Site.

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See Also:

Letters on the struggle of the auto workers

Replies to critics of the GM strike

[28 July 1998]

I am writing in concerns with my father who has been at the GM plant in Missouri. He has worked long and hard at that plant and I wish that this could be settled soon. All the families that have a family member that works at GM have been hit hard by the strike and wish selfish people would just start thinking about the important things in life instead of themselves for a change. I just though that I owe this to my dad to express my thoughts somehow and I hope he goes back to work again.

CD

18 July

I'm an auto worker at the Linden Assembly Plant in UAW Local 595. I have 13 years with GM. I was a former worker at the Tarrytown Assembly Plant.

I remember when we had to vote for team concept, we the members of Local 664 at Tarrytown turned it down the first time. Then GM told us that if we don't vote for it we would not get another product to build. So we accepted. So we could keep our jobs and continue to work.

I still feel that the company should take care of the American workers because we are second to none. Instead of worrying about how many cars are built, they should also be concerned about product design and engineering for that matter. It bothers me and a lot of my fellow workers that GM could build brand new assembly plants in other countries and not in America.

AG

Bronx, NY

19 July

It's come down to a matter of life and death that Unions must successfully represent the interests of not just their union members but all workers on this planet. This sounds melodramatic but it doesn't take a genius to see that the corporate agenda is drastically diminishing the

quality of life of working people all over. Why? Greed! Contrary to media-hype, greed is not good. Greed is poison and a result of what happens when people make a distinction between themselves and others based on abstract principles like wealth and power.

Listening to media commentators explaining that it's important that in a global market companies need to 'trim the fat, and become more profitable' it is obvious that labor (i.e. human beings) are looked upon simply as 'resources' that like old, outdated machinery must be eliminated in order for this thing called 'profit' to rise. The abstract concept (profit) becomes reality and the reality (people) becomes a concept. We need a system that works for PEOPLE, not a people that work for the system.

ML

19 July

I am a union member on the West Coast for a large airline, and I have been watching the strike news daily as has every person I work with. What we see happening is real sad. We all agree that what GM is forcing its employees to do had to stop some day. You see a large corporation that is willing to throw its money away instead of giving it to its employees, who are the people that make the head honchos look good.

Billions of dollars have been lost by GM, just to get a message across to the employees. How completely ridiculous! They could have invested that money into their work force and their cars. Ford and Chrysler have figured out how to build a great car and seem to have fairly happy employees, why can't GM figure it out?

For those of you on strike good luck and we all think about you every day.

RR

Seattle, WA

20 July

To say union workers in this country are inflexible and overpaid is so far from the truth that it makes me ill. If you look at the past weeks' articles about the striking workers of General Motors, most articles point to the union workers and how they must be flexible about work rules....

Today it is stylish and attractive to Wall Street investors for companies to hire college graduates from just about any background to run manufacturing departments. Some of these managers have never seen a manufacturing floor nor worked on one to understand the intricacies of how production machines really work. Sure these people can balance spread sheets, do accurate time studies, and may even be able to perform GS 9000 auditing and inspection procedures, but they have little knowledge about the experience it takes to keep a machine making parts to tolerances that can split a human hair five times.

Today upper management at companies appear to be the ones that need work rules changed to become more competitive and productive. Recently the chairman of General Motors received a large pay raise while at the same time he lost market share. Is this a fair statement to workers that now

have a major investment with their savings plans? Look at Roger Smith a few years back and the way he doubled his pension before leaving. He too lost record market share and was identically rewarded....

Now management is willing to forego 50-60 million a day in profits to prove a point. I wonder if they will take concessions if this proves to be a blunder on their part.

Many of the UNION workers within General Motors know what it takes to get a job done and get parts of high quality out the door. Now if we only had management that understood the same, working relationships would be better and production would be at an all time high.

How about comparing management's salaries to other countries' management salaries? We never hear that part of the story.

NI

Michigan GM worker

20 July

WSWS correctly points out that corporate and government entities are always doing their best to undermine worker solidarity. Every time that a new trade agreement is made, it only levels the playing field between competing businesses and says rain on the workers. I would like to see trade agreements that state that there must be a wage parity on goods that are imported to the US. In other words, if a country wants to export goods to the US, they have to have a minimum wage in effect of say \$3 to \$3.50 an hour. I think that would do wonders for our trade imbalance also since it would help to create and strengthen a class of consumers who would be able to purchase our goods.

By the way, I have heard some complaints about the extravagant wages that UAW employees are paid, but no one seems to be complaining about the extravagant wages of the CEO's top executives of these companies. Why not just pay the GM workers a paltry 10 percent of what their highest paid executive makes? This would be very similar to the wage structure in the more competitive Asian companies. I recall one year when K-Mart had had declines in three quarters in a row and had cut about 40,000 jobs. The CEO at that time made between 14 and 20 million dollars a year. Sounds like a lot of money to pay out to someone who is doing a lousy job. Wonder how far that money would have gone toward hiring more workers and improving services?

BC

20 July

General Motors has been nothing but a burden on the economy since the late 1970s. We all knew that the company would have to reorganize or liquidate since the Saturn venture failed. The 1990s boost in the economy just prolonged GM's demise.

Go ahead and strike. Break the camel's back. It will lead to more efficiency in the auto industry and it will teach organized labor a good lesson. 'Don't trust your union leadership.'

MM

20 July

I also work in an Upstate NY parts plant....

I'm witnessing a growing militant work force. My plant has every dept. on wheels. The trucks back up, and the dept. is rolled onto a flatbed, and off to Mexico. The union needs to rejoin the American work force. If they don't it won't be long for wildcat strikes, and the formation of vigilante mindset. We need to bring back the labor unions of the 30s, the tough no bull union that made America great!!!

I'm with every family suffering this strike.

MS

21 July

I happened upon your web page in an effort to learn as much as possible about the labor strife of the GM/UAW war. I am pleasantly surprised at both the depth and knowledge of your writers. While your reporting collaborates with other News-wire stories, it also presents some provocative, albeit deeply disturbing insights into the real issues facing

American auto workers in particular and the working class in general. Bravo. I applaud your efforts to inform the public with a healthy dose of reality. Bitter as it may be to swallow, the truth will be revealed, and help bring about the demise of Global Capitalism. Thank you for your enlightened reporting.

Sincerely,

DR

UAW Local 595, Linden, NJ

22 July

I would like to make a comment on the people that are against the strike. I work in a UAW factory, not GM. I support the strike called by the brother and sisters in those plants. Their decision was not a very easy decision. I think people think we go into the meeting and say OK let's strike. It's not like that at all. They are just as worried about their families, house and food, just as you are, but they are protecting your kids' futures right this minute. If they want to export the jobs at least they could pay them a fair and reasonable rate of pay, but instead you see corporate wages going high and higher and our jobs are less and less. So let's keep our work here for the generations to come.

Thank you

UAW # 8

TW

22 July

UAW union officials do not care about the workers or their plight; the only reason they want their job is for the big bucks!! I read when the '96 contract was agreed upon in a Detroit office, that the only people who knew what was in it was the handful of people in the room! Does this possibly tell you why we have these problems now?? Remember, also, the leaders had to take their Vegas convention trip and then the next week, have the nerve to have a gate-collection to provide meals for fellow workers out of work!! Do they know no shame?

AR

22 July

I am a General Motors employee for the Janesville, truck and bus group. I believe that we all should stick together. I believe we should save US jobs and help with the company's growth. When the time comes for our plant to go out on strike for whatever reason, I would like to know that employees in other plants support us. We are all in this together. Fact is that General Motors knows how to solve these issues. If they do so, every one will be well-off and the company will resume production. I support Flint in every way and I wish them lots of hope in winning this strike. That is my opinion.

MS

GM worker

9 July 1998

I trust the National Union to do what is best for the American People. If GM is not stopped then they will send all the work to other countries and say to hell with the American people but expect us to buy the damn cars that foreign countries make. I say strike and cripple them and show them that America is still Strong and will not tolerate this kind of treatment.

KS

12 July 1998

Dear KS,

We thank you for your letter to the WSWS but must disagree with your comments on the strike at GM. We fail to see how the industrial and political solidarity required by the working class today can be established on the basis of the American nationalism expressed in your message. No doubt you are a militant defender of the union in the US, but it seems that you have not stopped to consider the position of workers in other countries. How should workers in Korea, Canada or Mexico take your letter? Why should they support the GM strikers?

The globalization of the auto industry has shown that the workers are presently handicapped by the fact that they lack an international industrial and political strategy to defend jobs and improve working and living conditions. Here a crucial question must be asked: How are workers in any country to take a step forward if they allow themselves to be pitted against workers in other countries in the never-ending drive of the corporations to lower labor costs? The only program that can meet the needs of workers in this age of global capital is summed up in the slogan: 'Workers of the world, unite!'

Yours sincerely,
WSWS Editorial Board
14 July 1998

Get these strikes over with. You are destroying my life. I do not feel sorry for the UAW, they are overpaid and under-worked. It's pitiful. Stop thinking only about yourselves and think of the other people that depend on GM and are not union to make a living. We are all human beings even if we are not members of the UAW.

Signed,
KL
Alma, MI
12 July 1998

Dear KL,

We must differ with what you have to say about the strike. First of all, the WSWS has maintained that the auto shutdown involves the fate of all working people, not only in the US but around the world. It is a conflict between the profit imperatives of GM, directly representing the interests of its major stockholders and indirectly speaking for the entire capitalist class, and the needs of the GM workers for secure jobs. Should this strike be defeated as others have been over the past two decades and further work concessions granted, a step back will be taken everywhere by the working class, of which you yourself are likely a part. As the levels of productivity are heightened and the conditions of employment are worsened at GM, these will become benchmarks for other automakers and, indirectly, for entirely different industries. After all, from the standpoint of big business, one section of workers will always be 'overpaid and underworked' with respect to those employed under more exploitative conditions. For the working class to accept or endorse this argument, however, is to condemn itself to unending social retrogression.

I think that you'll see from a number of the comments of auto workers on this site that the GM strikers are motivated by many sentiments, but least of all selfishness. Many of the workers that we've met at the struck plants are relatively older and not far from retirement. But they are concerned about the fate of future generations and the communities in which they live.

Finally, we should just make clear to you that our site does not speak for or endorse the policies of the UAW. Precisely because we defend the interests of the rank-and-file workers, we have issued sharp warnings about the dangers posed by the policies of the UAW bureaucracy, particularly its defense of the profit interests of GM, its nationalism, and its alliance with the Democratic Party.

Yours sincerely,
WSWS Editorial Board
14 July 1998

With thousands of striking GM workers and 40,000 angry construction workers in NY, it seems like a good opportunity for all ALL workers to combine forces and have a massive demonstration in support of workers' rights, and civil rights and liberty in general. It would be a great time for a few million of us serfs to convene in Detroit, or NY, or DC ...

JH
West Coast, US
11 July 1998

When is it going to stop?????? My husband has 30 years in with GM and my father had 19 years. My dad saw his retirement and because of the union and their local argument with GM my husband might not see his retirement. I really think the strikers have some nerve to cause the whole country to spiral downward just when things were looking up in the U.S. What do they think GM will do now? I would put a solid opinion on GM telling all the U.S. workers where to go in no uncertain terms. That would put thousands out on the street in a blink of an eye. Where is our President through this. I realize he has big trouble of his own, but this isn't going to help this country unless he steps in and demands they settle this strike immediately. I feel terribly sorry for the people that have lost everything because of floods, fire, tornadoes and the fury of mother nature, but think of the loss of about 180,000 family homes and dreams. We can't pay mortgages, utilities, car payments, etc. on what McDonalds and Burger King pays. I realize the fight for the job security is extremely important but the striking of the company seems like the Jurassic era compared to today's high tech society. Back fifty years ago the union was strong and now it doesn't have the roar it once had. So where does it leave all of us? I just hope it's not out in the street. I pray for every person whether they work for GM or have just been an individual that has hit the fall out from this strike.

Thanks for letting me get this off my chest.
Pray for Settlement.

BE
11 July 1998

Dear BE:

Thanks for writing to the *World Socialist Web Site*. We hope that you'll continue to follow the discussion of the GM strike.

As for your letter, it's a rather contradictory one. Allow us to say that while you are justifiably angry about the difficult situation that confronts autoworkers and their families, your blame on those workers who have decided to take a stand for their jobs and conditions is misplaced.

That the workers find their jobs and futures in such peril is itself a result of social policies that have been carried out for two decades by big business and its political representatives, the Democrats and the Republicans. The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a continued attack on the living standard of the working population. The massive waves of downsizing have had a profound impact on large sections of the working class and middle class who, in general, have found new work only at lower pay and with far less security than their previous jobs offered. Over the past two decades, vast cuts have been made in social programs for health care, housing and unemployment while taxes have been sharply reduced for the wealthy. The result has been a dramatic increase in social inequality and far greater hardship for workers.

Certainly, the officials of the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions deserve no small degree of blame for the results of this process. Nominally representing more than 10 million workers in basic industry they certainly had an opportunity to organize resistance to the policies of big business. But the point is that they did not. The WSWS criticizes these organizations for failing to defend the workers' basic interests. Stories of uncompromising defiance of corporate America by the unions during this period are, frankly, fictitious. During the 1980s and '90s union officials have joined corporate boards, betrayed strike after strike and doggedly promoted the Democratic Party.

A new strategy is definitely needed. GM is clearly taking a hard line in order to take measures to guarantee its profits. As for the Clinton administration, it supports the changes being implemented by GM. The UAW has proven unable to offer any real resistance or alternative strategy, precisely because it endorses the profit system. This is precisely the conception that must be rejected.

Yours sincerely,

WSWS Editorial Board

14 July 1998

This format of informal discussions between the WSWS and striking workers is great! There needs to be more of this inside look into the social and political problems that particular workers and world labor are grappling with.

These interviews give readers a more concrete picture of the dynamic state of consciousness of workers who are being impelled by their struggle, and the SEP's intervention, to question the old trade union reformist and nationalist ways of thinking, and move toward an international socialist solution.

I agree that the profit system and nation states are not biologically natural or eternal, but transitory obsolete, historical products which now restrict and choke off the life of the most creative and productive forces, nature and human labor.

Regards,

11 July 1998

I don't think that Wall Street has any business telling GM or any other company how to run a business. They should keep busy by pinching their own pennies and let business proceed at their own pace. No one on Wall street can say that GM has not and is not making money, but how much money will make these sharks of the money world happy? It seems to me that the older folks up there have turned into money collectors and the young ones are afflicted with what I call 'THE NEW COLLEGE EDUCATION' where they have partied through school, learned that if they can talk louder than anyone else their ideas, as silly as they may be, will be heard. What they lack is patriotism and the good common sense that an alley cat has. Look around folks, the world that you are ruining is ours as well as yours!

CAD

11 July 1998

Dear Editor,

I would love to have a \$23 per hour job. I studied mathematics at an Ivy League university, speak three languages, and am employed as a computer programmer. My job often requires me to work 80 hours per week without overtime or compensation beyond a negligible meal allowance. Yet I make far less than most GM factory workers.

In such a light, it appears that the UAW workers are vastly overpaid for their skills. The fact that Mexican workers are willing (and able) to work for one tenth of the UAW workers' salaries is evidence of this.

So long as autos remain a commodity product, and auto industry a globalized one, the UAW workers cannot expect to sustain the extreme wage disparity between themselves and the rest of the developing world, without being commensurately more productive. ! Yet by clinging to outmoded work rules, the UAW prevents this, and will ultimately reap (50,000 job losses) what it has sown.

Rather than vainly try to 'protect' dull, deadening, and dangerous jobs in a technically obsolete assembly plant, the UAW should realize that though the number of factory workers will decline through automation and computerization, these industries will create higher paying, more interesting, and safer positions in the secondary industries, and should attempt to prepare its members for such day.

GB

10 July 1998

GB,

Notwithstanding your mastery of mathematics, fluency in three languages and computer programming skills, your arrogant letter shows no understanding of social realities. You say essentially the following: Insofar as multinational corporations can exploit labor for next to nothing in many parts of the world, workers in the more advanced countries should accept the inevitable job cuts and leveling down of wages that

accompany globalization under capitalism.

Apparently you've never stopped to consider that your argument might just as easily be applied to computer programming as to auto assembly. In India one finds programmers with equal skill and mathematical ability working for less than one-tenth the wages of their American counterparts.

Yours sincerely,

WSWS Editorial Board

14 July 1998

I am a GM worker and I would like to ask for some one to find out how many of our cars from the USA are exported to other countries....???? I might be wrong but it would be interesting to find out many of their cars come in and ours out.... I know that we are supposed to be global but I think that we are headed the same way the steel mills and other jobs have taken. They're not here anymore.... How many Fords, Chevy's, Olds, Pontiacs, etc. are sold in Germany, Mexico, etc. that were made in the United States and EXPORTED there....?????.... I know I've said it twice but I watch the world news and different shows on various countries and I haven't seen anything that looks like what we make here.... All I can say is that if I lose my job by all the rearrangements going on and the cutbacks I doubt if I can buy another new truck or car.... I just hope that I can get a job on the electric company, phone co., gas co., or one of the major services you really need so no one will tell us, the auto workers, that we get paid too much, I've heard that time and time again. Come on in a parts plant and sweat a little....

RB

8 Jul 1998

Dear RB,

While recent figures indicate that the US is a net importer of automobiles, these statistics are losing much of their meaning. As we've pointed out on the *World Socialist Web Site*, the auto industry is increasingly global in character, with cars assembled across national boundaries. The 'nationality' of a vehicle is a concept that is increasingly outmoded.

The real question raised by your letter is the following: What policies and outlook does the working class need to adopt in order to stop all job losses and concessions *in every country*?

WSWS Editorial Board

14 July 1998

As a former Political Science major now working as an administrative support employer, I can hardly close my eyes and quiet my sighs at the world in front of me today. So I wanted to voice my views and support for the striking auto workers. The pendulum is swinging back in favor of the worker and pulling at the purse strings of the Corporate CEOs. As a worker in Corporate America, it scares me that so few stand up for their beliefs for fear of reprisal. Unity is the only solution. Working for a corporation that voted out a union, I honestly do have mixed views, but know for certain, that RECORD corporate profits and continual downsizing and a younger and cheaper workforce in America reduce the chances of me staying afloat after I turn 50 years old.

The pseudo-TV-worker personality prototype is killing those of us that live in reality. Single mothers, deadbeat parents, higher costs of everything and of course you know we must have everything. Ugh! Where does it all end?

The exploitation of the third-world countries' labor force and the declining cost of labor to produce more, that is of a lesser quality, can only mean trouble for those that seek to hold onto their jobs in the so-called developed worlds. Furthermore, with the world population dramatically increasing, is there enough and for who? Our democracy is not a voice for the people any longer, but for the corporate puppets who manipulate the legislation. I smell trouble in the air for the future of America. Look at our violent youth... SOS. Guess I can struggle and stand

up for justice and peace and achieve a state of a peaceful wreck.

Wide Awake in America

LP

1 July 1998

Being new to the web, I was very surprised to find this site. I am a factory worker who is on lay-off because of these strikes, and I am employed by GM. I was very surprised to find in the interviews with two of our Australian counterparts (fellow auto employees) that we here in the US are considered competitors.

Perhaps I am naive, but I had never thought of the people in other nations, in the blue collar workforce, as competitors. I guess that perhaps this comes from the differences in the ways that different people express themselves. I have always felt that the very fact that we are employed in the auto industry and face the same problems in the workplace makes us brothers and sisters with the same cause, not only to do our respective jobs to the best of our abilities, but also to keep our workplaces the safest that we can for all concerned.

I was pleased to see that they recognize that our fate is intertwined with theirs. We here are fighting to have GM keep their word that has been negotiated and is in a signed contract. If we allow them to break their word and continue to do as they like at a local level, then the contracts that they have signed nationally will be no good either. Time after time they have given their word at various individual plants in many locations, only to break it when they feel that it is to their advantage.

I work for a plant that GM had promised not to sell or close before 1999. In December of 1997, they passed out a paper that said that they were going ahead and putting the plant on the sale block. Then they sold the plant. The new owners were supposed to close the sale by the end of June. So far they haven't closed the sale, but this is what we are fighting over. We opened the local agreement talks early, because GM asked us to, and gave them what they wanted as far as things that they said needed to be changed. They then turned around and broke the promises that they made in return for the changes that we agreed to.

Do not take me wrong, I agree that there are practices in the workplace that need to be changed. But in the case of my plant the changes were made and then GM did what it wanted to do anyway. If we allow it to continue here, it will not be long before it is being done everywhere else. I can see where it is being done to the workers in Australia and that the union hasn't been successful in stopping it. I have no answers, because from what I read and understood, perhaps the unions operate differently in other nations. I cannot say much from the standpoint of those unions, because I have no understanding of the way things work in other countries. I do not mean to offend anyone because of my misunderstanding. It would be nice to be able to talk to other people in the auto industry and see what they feel and how things are being done in their situations.

Fraternally yours,

SC

United States

30 June 1998

I just read your article titled, 'GM's hard line staggers United Auto Workers officials.' I don't have time to give a detailed response to it, but I want to thank you for publishing it.

Traditional media outlets report the facts of events, but they inevitably (and deliberately) neglect the reasons for the events, the greater context that gives meaning to the events. Your article is illuminating for filling in what CNN leaves out.

Thanks again, and keep up the great writing.

AD

30 June 1998

As long as the GM has all the power to control its workers and the labor unions give in workers will have an uphill battle for their jobs.

RR UFCW/Organizer/Rep.

27 June 1998

I happen to be an American citizen living in Georgia. I have absolutely nothing to do with the auto industry with the exception of purchasing one from time to time. I was, however, 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!

Sincerely,

DJS

22 June 1998

I can understand that UAW wants to keep their jobs here. I hope that they do. What I don't understand is all these UAW workers complaining they don't make enough money. Most GM workers earn more than three people put together. I work for a rubber factory that makes all the car mats for the Big Three. Plus they make mats for every other car maker there is. GM workers complain about \$25 an hour. Well come to my work and try working for \$8.35 an hour and see how they like that. I still can make a good living. So I hope they can keep their jobs here but quit complaining about the money they make. I would do anything I could to work for you guys.

USWA Local 50 member

19 June 1998

I'm writing because we have to do something about what is going on with the UAW. I think they are striking for a good reason. Plus I remember back in 1994 when they were going to help us with our strike fund. Now we all should stand up and help them out. They are striking because enough jobs are going over the border. Plus these companies are starting nonunion companies. We have to stand up for our future and our children's future or we will all lose. Plus we have to stand up to the Government. They are trying to get their hands in our pensions and we can't let it happen. I'm tired and I'm sure a lot of other people are tired of the government not paying attention to the people in the United States. We should come first. Think of all the people that are in the unions. We should strike the nation and stand up for our rights. If we don't it will be to late. So let's unite and stand and fight.

Thank you,

MM

16 June 1998

See Also:

After the defeat of the GM strike: What way forward for auto workers?



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact