

Auto workers turn away from GM-UAW collaboration

Editorial Board
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The strike vote Sunday by workers at GM's Saturn plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee could lead to the shutdown of the only GM assembly plant still operating in the United States. More than 5,000 out of the 7,200 workers at the plant participated in the balloting--an enormous turnout--and some 96 percent voted to authorize a strike.

The overwhelming strike vote represents an important shift in the thinking of the Saturn workers. It is an expression of the growing militancy among auto workers and the American working class as a whole, and an indication that the rank and file are turning their backs on the policy of labor-management collaboration, which the United Auto Workers and the rest of the AFL-CIO have pursued for the past two decades.

The Saturn vote came as the nationwide shutdown of General Motors moved into its seventh week, with 9,200 workers on the picket lines at two parts plants in Flint, and 186,000 other workers laid off in assembly and parts plants throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico. The GM strike is already the largest industrial dispute in the US in 15 years, eclipsing last year's strike at United Parcel Service.

Sunday's vote at Saturn brings to four the number of UAW locals set to follow in the footsteps of Locals 659 and 651 in Flint. Workers at parts plants in Dayton, Ohio and Indianapolis, and at the Buick City complex in Flint have voted strike authorization, and a similar vote is expected shortly at the Corvette assembly plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Another indication of rising tensions on the shop floor came at GM's engine plant in Romulus, Michigan, in the Detroit suburbs, which is still operating. Production at the plant was disrupted Wednesday, July 15, when the company began bringing in spark plugs made by NGK, a Japanese-owned supplier, instead of

those manufactured at the strikebound Delphi East plant in Flint.

While union committeemen began the protest by throwing boxes of NGK spark plugs on the floor, the response from the ranks went beyond their expectations. All production was halted for 45 minutes, as the protest swept through the plant. The company later announced the suspension of eight union members.

A laboratory for corporatism

General Motors established the Saturn division in 1984 as a model for the labor-management collaboration that the UAW had approved in principle at the union's 1983 national convention. The plant was set up on an explicitly nationalist basis, to build a small car that would compete with the imported Japanese compacts that were then making huge inroads into GM's market.

The plant was located at Spring Hill, Tennessee, hundreds of miles from any other GM facility. While some workers and most union officials at the plant were transferred in from the north, much of the work force was recruited locally in a poor and relatively backward region of the rural South, with no traditions of trade unionism or labor militancy.

The aim of both GM management and the UAW bureaucracy was to provide an almost chemically pure environment for the development of corporatism. Labor-management committees were put into operation even before the assembly lines, with the aim of preventing the development of any understanding among the workers that they had class interests independent of and opposed to those of the company.

Saturn had a separate contract with the UAW, which provided the workers in Spring Hill with base wages only 80 percent of those paid at other GM-UAW plants, but with the promise that by meeting productivity and quality goals, workers would make up the difference and more. The Saturn workers were also promised greater job security.

For a number of years, the formula appeared to work. Spring Hill workers earned more than their counterparts at other GM plants, productivity and quality were comparable to Japanese transplants in the US, and Saturn sold well. Employment grew steadily and no Spring Hill worker was ever laid off. The car and its factory were featured heavily in GM advertising, under the slogan, 'A different kind of car company,' with Saturn workers frequently serving as spokespersons.

But over the past few years the conditions at Saturn have worsened. Sales stagnated and pay levels began to drop, wiping out the relative advantage the workers had enjoyed. Production was cut from 316,000 to 270,000 a year, and GM decided to build a new mid-size Saturn at its Linden, New Jersey plant, rather than at Spring Hill.

This led to a campaign earlier this year to force a referendum vote on whether to abandon the unique Saturn agreement and establish a local contract similar to those in place at other GM plants. While this proposal was defeated by a two-to-one margin, the vote testified more to a lack of enthusiasm for the alternative than any great support for the Saturn agreement itself.

A vote of no confidence

The strike vote at Saturn is not only a blow to GM, it is a vote of no confidence in the whole strategy pursued by the UAW bureaucracy since the Chrysler bailout 20 years ago. For years Solidarity House held up Saturn as a model for the relationship it wished to establish with GM throughout its corporate empire. UAW Vice President Richard Shoemaker bemoaned the impending strike at Saturn, saying that the company had betrayed its earlier promises of labor-management cooperation.

The UAW bureaucracy has been taken aback by the all-out character of the confrontation which has erupted at GM, frightened by both the uncompromising demands of the company and the rising militancy among the workers. Hence its decision to begin

arbitration Wednesday of the key issue of whether the local strikes in Flint are in violation of the contract. Solidarity House has made it clear that an unfavorable ruling will mean an immediate calling off of the strikes.

In rejecting the longstanding policy of labor-management cooperation at Saturn, the auto workers at Spring Hill have not yet found an alternative. But their decision has immense importance and is deeply symbolic. Along with the GM strike as a whole, which has lasted far longer than corporate and union observers predicted, it may well mark the beginning of a serious radicalization of broader layers of the working class.

As they reject the corporatism which has transformed the UAW and its counterparts in other industries into company unions, there are many signs of a revival of older and more profound class sentiments. The class struggle in the United States, while it has never developed to the point of an open political challenge to capitalism by great masses of workers, has always been characterized by the extreme sharpness of the conflict between labor and capital and the rapidity with which it could explode into violent confrontation.

So far the search for alternatives has not yet taken a conscious political form. Auto workers are still susceptible to nationalist demagoguery, as the UAW officials seek to cover their lack of any serious policy with a frenzied burst of flag-waving. But inevitably a significant movement of the working class will stir up a fresh breeze.

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