

Letters on the struggle of the auto workers

Replies to critics of the GM strike

28 July 1998

Replies to the letters published below were written by David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US), for the World Socialist Web Site.

Good Afternoon,

I am writing to you from a car dealership, you know the place that sells the cars and trucks that are produced by the 'workers' of North America and beyond.

As you may or may not be aware, we are the individuals that are on the front line, actually doing battle in a price sensitive, ultra aggressive, over dealered, environment. We feel we are forgotten in your 'workers' world.

We do not belong to unions. We do not have collective bargaining. We do not have a grievance process. We do not have 'work to rule.' We do have a theory of 'The Company Owes Me.' Further, we do not look at the company as the enemy of America so ready to sell its 'workers' out for profit.

Rather, our ability to influence the consumer to purchase the vehicles the 'workers' build is the only thing that keeps the 'workers,' working! Without us, the 'workers' do not have jobs. Why? Well, if a car is not sold, a car is not ordered, if a car is not ordered, a car does not have to be built, if a car does not have to be built, a 'worker' loses his/her job--union or not! If a 'worker' loses his/her job, another worker loses his/her job. Why? Well, if a car is not built, the supplier of the parts for that car is not required, nor is the raw materials supplier to the parts supplier. Get the picture.

Could you imagine a world in which the 'real' producers stopped producing? Could you imagine a world in which all salespeople--the ones that work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week with not a bit of security, actually went on strike? Think about it. Just for once, think about it.

Finally, please understand one thing very clearly. The reason we do not stop producing is very simple. If we stop, the plants stop, and the thought of purposely causing thousands of jobs to end makes us sick. We choose to work, and work hard. We choose, to sell, and sell lots. We choose to do what is right for the 'workers,' the company and most of all, the customer.

Sorry, I have to ask one more question. Do the 'workers' know who the customer is?

Sincerely,

GB

A Professional Vehicle Salesperson Wondering Why?

18 July

Dear GB,

It seems to us that you have a rather distorted picture of reality. We have no doubt that you take your profession seriously and that you work very hard. But the cars in your showroom were built by workers, and without their labor there would be nothing for you to sell. Or were car dealerships created before workers began to build cars?

It is possible to imagine an auto industry without car dealerships. (Indeed, as you probably know, GM itself calculates that the Internet will result in the shutdown of thousands of dealerships across the country.) It is

certainly possible to imagine an auto industry without the private ownership of the means of production. But the creation of automobiles, and the value embodied within them, depends upon the labor expended by human beings in the process of production.

Rather than denouncing the auto workers, you should reflect on the fact that it is, in the first instance, their labor that makes your livelihood possible.

WHY DOESN'T GM BE FAIR WITH THEIR EMPLOYEES? IF GM KEEPS SENDING JOBS TO MEXICO WHO WILL BUY THEIR CARS?

BPR

21 July

Thank you for your letter. The simple answer to your question is that GM's goal is not fairness but profits and the accumulation of the personal wealth of its large shareholders.

To the Editor,

While I think your position on the likely outcome of the current GM strike is very insightful, I have to wonder about the feasibility of your notion that it is even remotely possible in our current world for workers across national boundaries to unite in any meaningful way in a class struggle against what you call the interests of a few billionaires.

I think you are dead on when you suggest that globalization is a fact that cannot be denied and that the UAW is grossly over-estimating it's ability to fight a war with its main weapon (striking N/A plants) playing directly to the long range interests of its adversary.

However, I have to wonder if your idealism isn't a little far afield when you suggest that UAW membership should join forces with third world workers who are ultimately taking their jobs, to stem the tide of globalization. While your organization is, no doubt, made up of highly intelligent and educated folks, and your idealism demonstrates an admirable faith in humanity, I think it is silly to suggest that the wonderful folks who constitute the work force in the world's automobile plants are capable of truly envisioning a world without borders where a living wage is to be had by all.

The one thing that WSWs and other socialist organizations refuse to let go of is that Man is basically a greedy creature, who will always take the goodies for himself before he shares them with his fellow man. It is in fact a rare human, who truly lives the Christian ethic, and without the morality of Christianity, the world has demonstrated how viable the socialist model worked with the Soviet experience.

Regardless of the inequities that exist in the capitalistic model, it is the only one we have found that works, over time, with the inevitable fact that the smartest and strongest will always end up with the goodies anyway.

Your wisdom in reading the true nature of the effects of globalization on the world's auto industries should be extended beyond the naive notion that there is a political/economic model out there that will allow all peoples to live in harmony in an ideal society where workers interests are a controlling factor in the global economy. It may sound nice but it ain't

never gonna happen!

TH
Toledo, Ohio
21 July

Dear TH,

Thank you for your letter. It is interesting to note that your defense of capitalism proceeds from the premise that man is essentially evil and ruled by the basest instincts. A society whose own defenders believe that it represents the worst in man is not one that can look to the future with any confidence.

As a matter of fact, the revolutionaries who brought the United States into being espoused a democratic philosophy very different from that expressed in your letter. It was not the principle of selfishness and greed that constituted the 'Spirit of '76,' but the vision that 'All men are created equal.' Nearly a century later, the democratic vision proclaimed by Jefferson was reaffirmed by Lincoln in the second American Revolution--the Civil War--which ended with the destruction of slavery.

Your depiction of mankind is an expression not of tough-minded realism but of the deepest pessimism. Even the rather modest and elementary goal of a world 'where a living wage is to be had by all' seems to you to be 'silly.' Unable to imagine the possibility of a more just, humane and democratic social order, you justify what exists by pontificating on the general rottenness of the human race.

But even as you wrote your letter, tens of thousands of auto workers were and still are demonstrating a degree of altruism and capacity for self-sacrifice that utterly belies your pessimistic and, to be blunt, reactionary views.

Dear Editor,

I just finished reading your article 'Auto workers turn away from GM-UAW collaboration.' I have been wanting to give my opinion to someone since the strike started. I work at a plastics factory in South Haven, Michigan, in which we make parts for Ford, Chrysler, Jeep, Honda, and GM. We supply the Prince Corporation in Holland. This strike, like many other Americans, is hurting me badly financially. My finances have been ripped apart. I have not been laid off completely. I work 3-4 days a week and get unemployment compensation.

My question is do the UAW strikers care about anyone but themselves? Do they realize all the people they are hurting? I have a house and car to pay for, I mean, I live from week to week, while these strikers earn \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year at GM. I wish they would settle soon because if not I will have to find another job. I really don't know what they think they are accomplishing with this strike. The only thing I see they are doing is destroying 187,000 people's existence. Thank you.

RL
21 July

Dear RL,

It is a sad truth that many thousands of people are being seriously hurt by the present situation. But why do you place the blame on the strikers, who are workers like yourself and who have gone for nearly two months without a paycheck? After all, are they not fighting over issues that are of importance to every worker? For the last 20 years working people have lived through a relentless and unending wave of corporate 'downsizing' that has destroyed millions of jobs and left entire industries and the communities that depend upon them devastated. The auto workers are taking a stand against this. They, no less than you, wish that it were possible to go back to work; but they are facing a powerful and ruthless enemy.

You refer to the wages of the auto workers as if their income were somehow unearned. But their labor has produced billions of dollars in profits for General Motors. And if they lose their strike, thousands of

these very workers will, like so many other working class victims of corporate policies, lose their livelihoods.

We sincerely sympathize with your plight, and appreciate your taking the time to write to us. But we think that your best course of action is to support the auto workers in a fight that is as important to you as it is to them.

Dear Sirs,

After reflecting upon the implications of my disenchantment with Capitalism, Trade Unionism and Democracy in these United States, I am forced agree in principle with the ideals you espouse on this web site. However, I am left in a bit of a quandary, as to how to go about this social transformation as an individual. Clearly, something has to be done to check the rampaging forces of Global Capitalism, yet this seems a remote possibility in light of the death of the former Soviet Union, and the alignment of 'Stalinist' China with the 'Almighty Dollar.'

You realize that before a course can be charted, we must first be united in purpose in order to reach our intended destination. And except for the bonds of Nationality or Religion, there is little else we as individuals can agree upon. Just how does the WSWS propose implementing these sweeping changes. Revolution? Armed conflict?

Or is working within the confines of the current bureaucracies still a viable means?

More 'politics as usual' will not sway the masses too much, and since 'Socialism' has already been declared 'dead' (in the minds of the capitalist nations) what hope is there for Mankind? Capitalism may be a Cancer, but it's taken on a life of it's own, and now we are the parasites on its back. In light of these insurmountable odds, would it be fair to say that things will have to get a lot worse before they can get better?

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,
DR, pawn
UAW Local 595, Linden NJ
26 July

Dear Brother R

Thank you for your two letters (the first of which we have already posted). The questions with which you are grappling are complex ones for which there are no easy answers. The only point that I would like to stress is that there seems to be a growing awareness among ever-broader sections of workers that the existing social and economic order is incapable of addressing their needs and concerns. But they do not yet have a clear sense of what the alternative to the prevailing system might be, or even whether an alternative is possible. For this situation the trade union bureaucracy--which for decades promoted the glories of American capitalism and peddled illusions in the Democratic Party--bears immense responsibility.

We would like to have the opportunity to speak with you at greater length. We have supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* who live in New York and New Jersey. Perhaps you would care to send us your telephone number so that we could contact you.

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