

General Motors worker discusses the Flint strikes

"We have to be international"

11 August 1998

The following is an interview with a General Motors worker from Saginaw, Michigan on the results of the 54-day United Auto Workers strike in Flint. An auto worker for more than 13 years, he has experienced three plant closings and the erosion of jobs and working conditions common to all GM workers.

The contract signed by the UAW leaders was a huge betrayal. Once again the union has called the agreement a victory for 'job security.' That has become the code word for closing plants left and right. The union always sells us on job security at every ratification meeting while the number of workers at GM has gone from 520,000 to 223,000 since the 1970s.

What kind of a deal is it to say the Delphi Flint East plant won't close until the year 2000? That's right around the corner. What about the productivity speedup in the contract? And what about the hundreds or maybe thousands of workers who will lose their jobs? With this contract, the UAW has given the company a free hand to close more plants.

After all we have gone through with the union over the past 15 years, I was hoping that the Flint strikes would be the point where workers finally took a stand against the UAW leadership and drew the line. Over the years, the concessions have led to one plant closing after another. The GM Willow Run plant in Ypsilanti, where I worked, is but one example. GM got tax abatements on the promise that they would keep the jobs in Ypsilanti. They closed the plant the next year.

During this strike I was picturing a big movement of auto workers, which would snowball. I thought there was a potential for this, that it got close. After all, even the Saturn workers voted to go out. This is why (UAW President Stephen) Yokich and (Vice President Richard) Shoemaker resorted to this contract and had to

play these dirty tricks.

The UAW has agreed to limit labor eruptions while they close down Buick City and sell off the Delphi parts unit. The UAW will make sure that the union will represent the Delphi workers no matter who owns it or what the conditions are; the union will be there to collect the dues. This contract is good for a group of investors at GM to start their own company.

The agreement to prevent strikes until the next contract is most disturbing. That they settled the Ohio brake plants based on this contract is outrageous. They have their own grievances.

I have been an auto worker for thirteen and a half years. I'm one of the 'GM gypsies' who has been forced to go from plant to plant to keep a job. If it weren't for the fact that I am in skilled trades, I wouldn't even have a job right now. In 1985 when I was working at the Fleetwood plant in Detroit - that was my first plant - we started seeing literature coming through with both the UAW and GM logos on it. Before that all newsletters, rules, information, etc. were simply from 'The Company'.

I put up a motion at a Local 15 union meeting at Fleetwood to stop the plant closing. The motion called on the local union to petition the international UAW to call a nationwide auto strike to stop Fleetwood from closing and to take up a fight for all workers. The motion was seconded and passed, but so much for parliamentary procedure. Joe Wilson, the local president, never sent the letter, never did anything except avoid me like the plague.

The Workers League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party) organized a picket to rally support for a struggle against the company and the union leadership. The protest was small because the union stood next to

management watching the picket and the workers knew if they joined in, they would be blacklisted.

I recall the union's nationalist outlook. The union posted signs in the parking lot -'No Foreign Vehicles.' After Fleetwood, I saw it at the Ypsilanti plant, then Buick City. Plants closed, workers were laid off, and the UAW pushed nationalism.

At Ypsilanti they used concessions to sell the contract and to try to make workers think jobs would be saved. GM sent the Cadillac to Arlington, Texas anyway. The UAW told us that the company had to compete, it had to make money. They couldn't compete without plant closings and concessions. The union had workers from one plant competing against workers at the other plant.

Meanwhile, the New Directions opposition in the UAW turned out to be Old Directions. This so-called alternative to the UAW leadership did nothing. More plants were closed in Pontiac than you could shake a stick at. So much for Don Douglas's new direction.

Workers don't listen to the union anymore because of the betrayals over the last 15 years. Caterpillar was also a turning point. It was a classic example of the horrible policy of the UAW. Workers lost their homes and their families while the other plants were producing. The UAW agreed to isolate individual locals while the others worked during the strike. They destroyed the strike.

Waving the flag of nationalism is not going to work for the workers, not the workers in any country. Workers throughout the world have the same interest and goals. We want to live with dignity, raise and care for our families. The capitalists have no intention of considering the workers' needs. They're out to make money and profits. GM is profiting because we make the profits for them. The profit system will never work for the masses.

Workers see what's happening and that the leadership isn't going to do anything. There has to be another answer. We have to be international. I think we have to drop the established labor organizations. Working people are looking for an alternative. I believe that strongly. We must have representation throughout the world.

See Also:
Western New York hit by spin-off of General Motors' parts division
[11 August 1998]

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

[3 August 1998]



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