

Workers strike sausage plant in Dearborn, Michigan

Our reporter
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Fifty-five members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 876 went on strike against Dearborn Sausage on January 15, four days after the expiration of their contract. The strike began only days following the announcement of Ford Motor Company's restructuring plan, which will result in 22,000 layoffs in North America alone. Dearborn Sausage is located just a few miles from Vulcan Forge, one of the plants slated for closure by the automaker.

Workers reacted against the outrageous contract demands of the company, voting by an overwhelming 48 to 3 for strike action. The company proposed a six-year agreement along with a paltry signing bonus. Workers were offered a 75-cent wage increase over the course of the agreement—35 cents in the first three years and 40 cents for the last three years. One striker told the WSWs that the signing bonus would amount to no more than \$450 after taxes, and even less for lower seniority workers.

The contract rejected by Local 876 members is reminiscent of labor agreements negotiated in past years by the United Auto Workers union with the Big Three automakers. Dearborn Sausage is demanding lower pay for newly hired workers, job title flexibility and benefits concessions. However, wages for the striking workers are far lower than for auto workers. Before the strike, starting workers made between \$9 and \$12 an hour. Under the proposed contract new hires would begin at only \$7 an hour.

The company is also seeking flexibility to transfer workers to other workstations within the plant and keep them there for up to nine months, regardless of their positions as boners, laborers or other classifications. In addition, the company would reserve the right to lower workers' pay scale despite work performance.

In relation to health benefits, the company wants to

increase worker co-payments to 50 percent. For new hires, the company would provide medical coverage only to employees and not their families. Clift Roach, Local 876 business representative, said the company's current health plan, CAM, was already inadequate, commenting that it "was the lowest insurance around. It's like Select Care or the Wellness Plan, but worse."

Katherine Peters, a bench worker for two years, told the WSWs, "I had problems with the company about my dental coverage before I could serve in the Reserve this past Christmas. The company has a 16-point penalty system. Even if you have a doctor's excuse from being off work, you are given two points. No call, no show; you get another two points. One guy couldn't come to work because he broke his leg on the way to work. The hospital gave him an excuse and he was still penalized."

Ms. Peters added, "There is a clause in the contract which states that if machinery or tools breaks down, the workers must pay it for at the company's cost, not the manufacturer's. If there is a clerical error made in your paycheck, you must pay the company back. Why should we pay for the mistakes made by payroll?"

A union official on the picket line said that Dearborn City workers have been crossing the picket line to patronize Dearborn Sausage. The City of Dearborn has also assisted strike-breaking operations by continuing to pick up the company's trash.



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