

Michigan workers speak out: "It seems like General Motors has abandoned Flint"

A reporting team
16 November 2002

A reporting team from the World Socialist Web Site interviewed workers in Flint, Michigan about conditions in the city.

Melvin, who works as a security guard, was an auto mechanic until he suffered a stroke. He lives near the site of the old Buick City plant with his wife and three children. He said, "It's been a downhill spiral. The social and economic situation has been going down. Look at downtown.

"People used to come here, get off the bus or plane and find employment. Now you find a bunch of vacant houses and buildings. It seems like General Motors has abandoned Flint. The people who are left here don't have a positive attitude about the future; that things will get better. The only reason I am still here is because of my aunt. She lives here and doesn't have any other relatives."

Angela and Mathew, a young professional couple, spoke of their experiences. Mathew said, "If you go down around Martin Luther King and 9th Street, every sixth house is in ruins. It is in dire condition. It is a bad situation getting worse.

"I worked for Compuware for a couple of years. Now I work at a place near Lansing because there is nothing here locally. I drive one hour each way. If I were to work here I would have to take a \$20,000 pay cut. It is worth it to pay the \$300 a month extra in gas."

Angela added, "We can't afford to cut more social programs. The majority of the people aren't in a position to sacrifice."

Charles Barnett, a machinist, spoke to the WSWs on the steps of his parent's house. It is located in an area near the AC Delphi plant. Many homes in the neighborhood are abandoned. The remaining homeowners are struggling to maintain the appearance of their neighborhood despite mounting signs of decay.

"I first came to Flint in 1978," Barnett said. "It wasn't anything like you see now. The city was making money then. Most of the stores and shops around here were open. That used to be a Citizens Bank right there across the street." He pointed to an abandoned building on the corner surrounded by weeds, trash and broken glass.

"Alcoholism, murder, rape, burglary, car theft have all increased. Poverty is sky-high now. Rent is higher. There used to be a lot of public housing. You only had to pay one dollar to get some of those houses. They would remodel those houses. All you had to do was be on the list, and when your name came up they would call you.

"Now you have only a few thousand workers making above average pay in the Flint area. Everyone else is making it on minimum scale. Something like 32,000 people work outside the Flint area—commute every day to work."

get better. I am not optimistic about the state takeover. These people from Lansing are only looking at dollars and cents on paper, they are not looking at people.”

Speaking of the 1998 strike at
Barnett said, “The mayor and the UAW president should have gotten General Motors to agree to bring more jobs into the area before they signed that contract. They left the area economically drained. Once you take a lot of jobs out of economically depressed areas, like that area where they closed the plant, you will have an economic collapse in the city. They should never have agreed on that contract.

“The union president, he was in a position to say I will agree to this contract only when you replace these jobs. The mayor went right along with that. GM, the unions and the city did not put new jobs back in that area. They left that whole area abandoned.”

He continued, “Now, you have got tens of thousands of abandoned houses in this city. The house next door burned four or five months ago.” The charred remains of a home loomed next door. Glass and boards covered the yard and a stench pervaded the air.

“The city knows it’s like that,” Barnett continued. “They haven’t been there to pick up all that burned up debris. If you tour the city you will find a whole bunch of buildings that have been burned up or fire-bombed, or have fallen in, and the city never tore them down. They won’t clear the land. The farther you go into the north side of the city, the more pestilence. You have thousands of slumlords in the city. All they want is a dollar. It might take three or more months to get something fixed in a house if you did rent it.

“The demand for houses is even greater in the Flint area than the demand for jobs. The housing situation in the Flint area is probably one of the worst in the whole country. Most of the houses are not up to code, they are not up to standard. A lot of them haven’t been remodeled. Some have just been patched up and rented again.”

Barnett said he didn’t believe any of the promises being made by the corporations or the politicians. “The situation is so bad, I don’t see how it could get worse. We are sick and tired of hearing about how things will



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