

GM workers in Detroit voice frustration at UAW leadership

Our reporting team
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A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team was at the Detroit/Hamtramck Assembly plant Monday morning when workers walked out. The plant builds the Buick Lucerne and the Cadillac DTS.

Workers leaving the plant indicated they had been given no advance warning by the United Auto Workers union that there would be a strike and complained that they had been kept in the dark throughout the negotiations.

At 11 A.M. one union official, UAW Local 22 Plant Chairman Frank Moultrie, appeared at the gate. When asked by a WSWWS reporter to explain the issues in dispute he replied, “We haven’t been given the details.”

Asked to explain why the union wasn’t providing workers with any information, Moultrie replied, “We can’t have any discussion in the media. When the time comes [UAW President Ron] Gettelfinger will make a statement. They’ll give us the details when they’re ready.”

Following the strike announcement, workers left the Hamtramck plant and congregated, along with others, at the Local 22 union hall in southwest Detroit. The hall sits across the street from a huge empty lot where the former Cadillac Assembly plant once stood. The plant, which once employed 10,000 workers, closed in 1987 and was subsequently demolished. Its sister plant—Fleetwood Body—where 6,000 UAW members worked at one time, also shut down that year. The Detroit/Hamtramck Assembly plant, built after razing the Poletown neighborhood, today employs less than 3,000 workers.

The GM closures devastated the area. One out of three people on Detroit’s southwest side currently lives below the national poverty line.

Workers at the hall expressed anger at the lack of

information provided by the union and skepticism over the proposal for a Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (VEBA), under which the companies would give the union control of retiree health care obligations, while paying only a fraction on each dollar.

Reginald, a worker with 22 years seniority who works at the Detroit/Hamtramck Assembly plant, told the WSWWS, “I don’t want the VEBA. They have had one at Goodyear for only a year and already they are suing. The union should take care of union business and the company should take care of company business.

“I have watched the UAW get really, really weak. Now it seems they have union and management together, and that is the way they want it.

“You just get bits and pieces of information from the union. I get most of my information off the Internet. All you can do is to try and keep yourself informed as best you can.”

John, a worker with 28 years at the plant, said, “Two years ago GM began claiming it was not making enough money. How do you stay the number one company for 50 years without making any money?

“They’re making profits whether they are keeping up with the Japanese companies or not.

“The big investors are saying let’s make more profits by cutting these workers. Every one of these executives wants to make millions. They’re making more money than can be spent in an entire lifetime.

“The retirees worked under the worst conditions thirty years ago, with tools that had a maximum torque. They paid their dues and now the companies want to take their benefits from them.

“As for this VEBA, I don’t want the union to control the benefits. We think this is a joke. Look what

happened at Caterpillar where they ran out of money and starting cutting benefits.

“Inside the plant we say the union is hee-hawing with management. Everyone knows that the union is part of management. Look at the union officials going off and partying at the Black Lake resort.

“I think this strike is just a smokescreen to make like the union is fighting.”

Kelly Williams, a worker at the Livonia Engine plant said. “I hired into Delphi after the 1998 strike, then I transferred to GM. I don’t want any wage cuts and I won’t vote for anything like this VEBA if it is going to take away benefits from retirees.

“At Delphi the workers took a \$7 an hour wage cut. You can’t raise a family on that. I am a single mother with two kids. If they cut my wages it would be devastating. I have to drive from Toledo every day [a distance of 60 miles]. Every month I was paying \$200 for gas. Now I’m paying \$400. I may be forced to sell my house.

“The Livonia Powertrain plant may be closed if they don’t get a new engine product. There were 1,100 workers there when I got hired in 1999. Now they are down to 290 with all the people retiring, taking buyouts and transferring.”

Robert Kirby, another Local 22 member with 27 years at GM, said, “This VEBA is going to be paid for by the company handing the union billions of dollars. People don’t trust the union. I heard they’ll get millions just to administer the fund.

“Over the last 10 years the union has gone down. They don’t fight like they used to. Years ago when you called a union representative to get help they would come down to the plant floor and talk to you first before going to management. Now they talk to the boss first and work out a deal, or they just tell you wait a month for an answer.

“The company and union turn one plant against the other. A new car model will go to the plant that is willing to accept the most cuts, not build the best product. You’ve got to give up wages or your break time to get the job. If not, they’ll close your plant.

“They always want us to work for less money. But it’s not like we live in a low-cost state. They’re always talking about us making \$30 an hour, but what about the \$600 a month we pay for gas or the \$4,000 we pay for taxes on our homes?

“The union doesn’t strike at the right time when it would really hurt the company. They let them stockpile tons of cars. GM is saying a strike is good because it will allow them to reduce their inventory.

“The company is crying broke but they are making profits hand over fist. It’s like they want to go back to the days of slavery where the rich sit back and we do all the work for nothing. I’m afraid for my grand kids and what kind of world they are going to grow up in.

“There are billions for the war and nothing for the 50 million poor people who don’t have health insurance. The president is an oilman and everybody knows this is a war for oil. If there was no oil in the Middle East, the US wouldn’t be concerned with terrorism.”

Another senior Detroit/Hamtramck Assembly worker told the WSWs, “There are only 2,500 workers at the plant now, including skilled trades. We realized that jobs would be eliminated due to technology, but it seems that whatever we do to make them more competitive, it is not enough. We gave up COLA, and it is still not enough. I don’t see how a company executive can get a \$10 million bonus and yet you still have a loss.

“This two tier system is nothing new. We have temporary employees making \$18 an hour and no benefits. They work them as temps indefinitely. If they complain, they get somebody else. We have one full line that is nothing but temporaries, and believe me, they’re working hard.”



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