

# General Motors workers oppose threats to retiree health care, jobs

A WSWWS reporting team  
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The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed striking General Motors workers on picket lines in Michigan, New York and Delaware. Workers expressed determined opposition to further concessions by the United Auto Workers union, particularly on the crucial questions of jobs and health care.

It is widely recognized that the proposed Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association (VEBA), under which retiree health care will be turned over to the UAW bureaucracy, threatens retired GM workers with devastating cuts in the near future. The average age of active GM workers is 49, meaning that many will be eligible for retirement in a few years' time.

A WSWWS reporting team spoke to workers at the GM Assembly plant in Pontiac, Michigan. It has been years since any Pontiacs have been produced in this city, where GM first produced its famous automobile brand named after the city. Instead after years of plant closings and mass layoffs nearly one in three people under the age of 18 lives below the official poverty line.

The 2,500 workers build the Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra pickup truck. In 1997 Pontiac assembly workers, members of UAW Local 594, conducted a three-month strike, the longest in four decades.

James Parker, a worker with 30 years at the plant, said, "I think we are doing the right thing, we need to take a stand.

"I don't want the VEBA. We should fight as long as we have to in order to keep our benefits. The only thing the company wants is for us to take more and more concessions. Less pay and more cuts. My position is no more concessions."

An electrical worker told the WSWWS, "I have been working at GM for 10 years. I am for the strike. I am not that familiar with the VEBA proposal but I can see

why GM would want the union to take over the program. Health-care costs are going up and they want to put it on the union to deal with it. It seems to me they have placed the union in a bind.

"I only pay a \$10 co-pay for doctors' visits for my family. It's a good program. But all they want to do is take the money and give it to the CEOs. I think they should spread it around.

"This strike is not just for us, it is for all working people. My feeling is support us and we will be there for them."

Kendall Stone has eight years at General Motors, five at the Pontiac plant. Kendall originally worked at the GM assembly plant in Janesville, Wisconsin.

"I stand behind the strike. The big issue in my mind is job security and health care. My dad just retired with more than 42 years at GM and he needs and deserves his health care.

"All we hear, however, is cuts. We just took a \$1 an hour wage cut recently."

Robert Swain has 35 years at GM, all at the Pontiac assembly plant, formerly known as the Truck plant.

"When I started in 1972 there were 17,000 people in this local. Now there are between 4,000 and 5,000. We are constantly being asked to give, give, give.

"I personally have a lot of questions about the VEBA program. I am not sure that I like it. I am 55 and I plan to retire in the next six months to a year. I could live another 25 years and I would like to have an insurance plan if I do.

Another worker added, "They just re-rated our plant because of the layoffs. Five hundred people were laid off in the last few weeks; 300 temporary workers and another 200 people who went to other facilities. As a result they cut the production from 54 vehicles per hour to 45.

“Everyone was laid off the week of August 27 to make the change. So everyone is worried about the possibility of more layoffs.”

Ron, a skilled trades worker at the Wilmington, Delaware assembly plant, spoke to the WSWS about the ongoing attack on jobs at his facility. The plant currently employs 1,500 hourly workers, down from over 3,000 in the 1980s. The planned closing of Chrysler’s plant in nearby Newark, Delaware will eliminate more than 2,000 jobs.

“GM has been consistently working to eliminate jobs for a long time now,” Ron said. “When I first began working here you’d be lucky to find a parking spot. Now half the lot is empty even with a full shift. Overall the company has been trying to transition to lower-paid labor, trying to cut costs wherever it can, and the temporary workers have the worst of it. They don’t get health benefits, pensions, nothing. The company uses them and ships them down the road.”

James, an electrician at the same plant, said, “The American autoworker is a dying breed, and the company is taking away everything we have bit by bit. We’re told we have to give up our pensions and retirement plans while the bosses are giving themselves million-dollar raises. That’s why we’re out here today.”

The WSWS also spoke to workers at the GM Powertrain Tonawanda Engine plant outside Buffalo, New York. The facility produces a variety of engines and transmissions and has recently been slated to produce modern fuel-efficient engines, and diesel, SUV and luxury engines. The plant employs 1,396 hourly and 261 salaried workers.

The area has been ravaged by plant closings, with the American Axle Manufacturing facility in Buffalo the latest plant slated to close. Strikers spoke to the WSWS on the picket line. Anthony DeMolato, employed for eight years, expressed deep concern about the UAW controlling the medical funds. “The VEBA issue should be off the table,” he said. Many workers echoed the sentiment that VEBA as presented by the UAW was unacceptable. Jim Gaffney, a 34-year GM employee, stated, “Workers about to retire have earned their rights ... the medical plan should be fully funded and put, possibly, into an annuity fund that no one could touch.” Strikers also supported an expansion of the strike to include other unions and auto companies. One worker

commented, “All workers benefit from our struggle here.”



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