

Chrysler strikers speak: “It’s time workers unite on a global basis, the same way the companies do”

Our reporting team
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Chrysler workers as they began picketing Wednesday morning at a stamping factory and assembly plant in Sterling Heights, Michigan. The UAW called off the strike six hours after it began (see “UAW stages six-hour strike to push through contract betrayal at Chrysler”).

Robert Hogberg, a metal worker with 13 years with Chrysler, said, “The union has slowly been selling us out for years, reopening contracts in the middle of an agreement and giving the company everything it wants.

“You can’t keep blaming the blue collar worker. What about management? They can’t run this place.

“The company and the union pit one local plant against others, telling us to accept a ‘modern operating agreement’ or we won’t have vehicles to build and jobs. All the Big Three auto workers should stick together or we’re not going have anything left.

“Cerberus is a private company and they don’t have to report anything. There are no checks and balances on them.”

Another worker, with 11 years seniority at Chrysler, said, “I used to work at Westinghouse. Ever since I came to Chrysler they have been downsizing and blaming the workers for the lack of car sales.

“It’s not the cost of hourly wages that causes the problem. Wages only make up 10 percent of the cost of a vehicle. How does Toyota do it paying the same wages? I don’t know all the ins and outs of the Japanese system, but they don’t pay their CEOs what they get paid in America.

“What man is worth \$3 million or \$6 million? DaimlerChrysler Chairman Dieter Zetsche got a \$3 million bonus when he sold us to Cerberus. Chrysler boss Tom LaSorda got at least \$1 million.

“Management at this plant hardly maintains the big stamping presses we work on, which causes extra scrap. All they do is band-aid repairs to keep them running.

“Chrysler wants to go to China for cheap labor. Now in South Korea the workers are complaining about losing work because the companies think they are paying them too much. It’s time workers unite on a global basis, the same way the companies do.

“The economy in Michigan is shot. In a year and a half when there is a market drop what’s going to happen to VEBA [the union-controlled retiree health-care trust fund] and all the 401(k) pension plans invested in the market? They won’t be worth anything.

“From Wall Street’s point of view these contracts are great. Not for us.”

Apollo Falconer, a young worker at the Sterling Heights stamping plant with eight years at Chrysler, said, “All we want is fairness and not to be taken advantage of. What is going to happen to the health benefits that the retirees depend on? We don’t want wage cuts.

“As for the VEBA we’re worried that the union officials will pinch the money and no one will know where it went. A lot of retirees have medical problems with their backs and other things because of working in here.

“For young workers there is nothing but a future of uncertainty. In 10 years will I have a job? Will my wages be cut? I have a long way before I retire, but will I have any pension to retire with?

“The whole economy around here depends on workers making good wages. Now unemployment is growing and I know a bundle of people whose houses have been foreclosed.

“Cerberus is out to make as much money as possible. They say we are an American-owned company now. Big deal. Are we any better off than when we were owned by Germans? Anyway what does that mean? We have an executive who just came here from Toyota. In a year from now he could be at another company. He’ll still get his big bonus.

“The government can find a trillion dollars for the war in Iraq but they say they don’t have money for health care or decent schools, which are a real mess.”

Joe Baker, with 34 years at Chrysler, said, “Cerberus is just out to make big money. What does a private equity firm know about making cars?

“With all the inventory the company has we could be out for 30 days and it wouldn’t hit them. All the Big Three workers should be out at once. That’s the only way to hurt Wall Street.

“Ford is going to be asking for even bigger concessions. And at GM they got the two-tier wages. That is messed up. Can you imagine that I’m making \$30 an hour and you’re working right next to me, doing the same thing, but only making \$15?

“I heard the UAW is going to become one of the GM’s biggest shareholders once the VEBA is paid in GM stocks. Who are they going to be working for? For GM, not us.”

A WSWS reporter also spoke to striking workers at the Wilmington, Delaware, Mopar parts plant an hour before the strike was called off. Mark, a worker at the plant, said he strongly opposed the VEBA. “I don’t want the union managing my retirement funds. It’s the company’s responsibility.”



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