

As full negotiations resume

American Axle workers denounce UAW concessions offer

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Full talks are set to resume between American Axle & Manufacturing and the United Auto Workers on Wednesday. Despite determined resistance from AAM workers, the UAW leadership is preparing to accept substantial concessions in the form of wage and benefit cuts. Over 3,600 workers have been on strike at plants in Michigan and western New York for more than six weeks.

UAW President Ron Gettelfinger met privately with AAM CEO Richard Dauch on Monday in an effort to stitch together a deal behind the backs of the striking workers. Top-level meetings were underway on Tuesday, and this will pave the way for the first full negotiations in weeks beginning Wednesday.

In a column published on Friday, Gettelfinger made clear that the union was prepared to accommodate the “legitimate concerns” of the company and accept a contract that “will mean real sacrifices by our members and real savings for the company.” This can only mean that the UAW is willing to substantially agree to the company’s demand to cut wages by more than one half and gut pension and health care benefits.

The strike is beginning to have a major impact on General Motors and has attracted the support of workers beyond American Axle. It is precisely at this point that the UAW will be most determined to cut the strike off and push through concessions.

More than anything else, the union bureaucracy wants to avoid a broader mobilization of auto workers. The union has sought to convince workers that concessions are inevitable, while wearing them down financially with a meager \$200 a week strike pay.

The company has responded favorably to the initial talks between Gettelfinger and Dauch, with company spokeswoman Renee Rogers calling them “productive.”

Union officials have also responded favorably. Dana Edwards, shop chairman at UAW Local 235 and a member of the bargaining committee, told the *Detroit News*, “Hopefully, [Gettelfinger and Dauch] see that it’s time to put things to a close as we get into the second month of this strike.”

American Axle has begun placing advertisements for strikebreakers, and Dauch has threatened to move all production to other plants in the US or in other countries if the company does not get major concessions. In recent days, AAM has agreed to a few token gestures, including turning over some financial information to the union and restoring payments and benefits to workers on sick leave, which were cancelled when the strike began.

At the same time, General Motors has announced that it will restart shifts at some assembly plants that had been shut down because of the strike, likely by using parts produced at AAM plants in Mexico.

The greatest danger to the strike is the treachery of the UAW bureaucracy, which is planning another agreement modeled after the concessions contracts it has agreed to again and again throughout the industry.

The Socialist Equality Party has called for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union, to take the conduct of the strike and the negotiations out of the hands of the UAW. A new political movement of the working class must be built to fight for a socialist alternative to the profit system, including putting the auto industry under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

On Monday and Tuesday, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking workers in Detroit. Many workers reacted sharply against the statements made by Gettelfinger pledging “real sacrifices by our members.”

Lydell said, “He is probably going to do some sellout deal like at Delphi and Dana. I don’t agree with all the concessions that the UAW gave up at Delphi and Dana, but those companies were losing money, so I understand to some extent. But they now want to pattern us after them. This company is not in bankruptcy; we should not give up a thing. If anything, [Dauch] owes us something for the millions he has made off our blood, sweat and tears.”

Brenda, a worker with 13 years told the WSW, “I can’t believe what Gettelfinger said. I can’t afford to take a buyout or retire; you have to have your health insurance and they’ve moved the retirement age up.

“They claimed they released the financial figures, but they won’t let us see them. They’ve probably doctored the books; I think [Dauch] is a crook. He and all of his sons are in this.”

Eric reacted to Gettelfinger statement. “To me it sounds like a sell-out. Dauch stated he could make a profit paying union wages. Now he gets a raise and we lose money? They give millions to the executives, but what about the workers? Why are you paying these executives millions when workers are making nothing?”

“Its greed—take from the workers to get more. That is how corporate America works. It’s going to be rich and working poor.”

“It sounds like [Gettelfinger] is for the company,” said Darren, a worker with 14 years at American Axle. “We already gave enough concessions in 2004 and 2006. We want to go in the other direction now.” Darren said that more concessions would severely impact the living conditions of workers.

John, a worker with 10 years seniority, said, “I think [Gettelfinger’s] comments are unacceptable, a disgrace, and an insult to the workers. American Axle is a profitable company that is taking its profits to undermine our union. We won’t accept any concessions.” John said he is in skilled trades, but if there is a contract that preserves his pay while cutting the pay of production workers, he will still oppose it.

Dan said that he did not think Gettelfinger should have met with Dauch. “We should not make any sacrifices when Dauch is not making sacrifices,” he said. Dauch was paid \$10.2 million in salary, bonuses and benefits in 2007.

Hinnie, a worker with 13 years experience, said he did not think workers would accept a contract with pay cuts. “We are not willing to accept anything less than what we are getting,” he said. “I already got a pay cut of 50 percent last year because of reduction in overtime.”

A worker of 14 years at American Axle complained that the workers were not being told anything about the negotiations. “There are too many confidentiality agreements,” he said. “Why is the membership denied information? Aren’t we the union? What happened to ‘power to the people’?”

“They are giving up something we don’t want to give up. Then they’ll shove it down our throats,” he said. “Why is the union giving up things? Everything else is going up. The price of gas is going up; food is going up. If everything else is going up, why are we going down?”

Charles, a young worker with nine years, said, “I’m not giving up what my grandfather fought for. We have given up so much and the company is making money hand over fist. Someone has to stand up. We’d rather see him shut down and move to Mexico than to work for slave wages.

“It’s not the workers in other countries who are stealing our jobs. I can’t blame anyone who is trying to earn a living. It’s these big companies that ship the jobs for cheaper labor. It doesn’t matter what nationality, race or sex you are, as long as we all stand united.

“They are trying to make it just the poor and the rich in this country. How much are these CEOs going to make? People can’t afford the food and the gas prices now. In the olden days you could have a good life with the paycheck brought home by the husband—now you can hardly feed your family on two.

“What do these executives care? If the company folds they still get millions of dollars—they’re still living comfortably. And the government, they answer to the billionaires. Their paychecks are guaranteed, they get jobs for life—they’re not worried.

“We have no idea why the UAW International is not calling out all the auto workers to stop what is happening here. As far as the financial information the company released to the union, we all know that these companies keep double books in order to justify more and more wage cuts.”

Another worker said, “Year after year American Axle was topping the list of auto companies where workers were killed on the job. We’ve given everything to this company.”

Referring to the dismantling of the auto industry by private equity firms like Cerberus—which owns Chrysler LLC, he continued, “I’ve worked for three auto companies that have been owned by the private equity firm Blackstone, including here at American Axle. These investors like buying up manufacturing firms because if they go belly up they can always sell the equipment.

“The union has stopped us from blocking the company from shipping axles out of the plant. The UAW used to fight big business, now they are big business. With control of the VEBA [the multi-billion dollar retiree health care trust fund], they are going to be making loads of money. But the fund is going to run out of money like it did at Caterpillar and Detroit Diesel. Then the union is going to cut the benefits from the retirees.”

Another worker said, “Look how the government has bailed out Bear Stearns. They’ve got plenty of money for Wall Street, but how am I going to tell my daughter I can’t afford to send her to college because they’ve cut my pay?”

Doug said, “I’d love to see a political movement of workers. My aunt teaches history and she told me we are going to see a workers revolution in this country. It’s going to be more than just another Boston Tea Party.

“For years the companies and the unions conditioned workers to believe we have to reopen our contracts and give back what we earned. It’s got to stop.”



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