

UAW sellout of American Axle strike imminent

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18 April 2008

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The United Auto Workers is rapidly pushing to finalize a concessionary agreement in the now eight-week-long strike by 3,600 workers in Michigan and western New York against auto parts maker American Axle.

According to a report in the industry journal *Automotive News*, a tentative agreement could be reached by this weekend. The paper quoted American Axle spokesperson Renee Rogers who said, “Negotiations are continuing progressing. The process is moving along.”

Automotive News wrote: “The two sides are making progress on three fronts: Wages, health care and legacy costs, and job classifications.” American Axle is insisting on a wage cut from \$28 an hour to as low as \$11.50, the elimination of pensions, steep cuts in health-care benefits and a massive consolidation of job classifications that would lead to substantial job reductions.

As usual, the UAW refused to make any comment on the content of the negotiations. However, in an op-ed piece published in the *Detroit News* earlier this month, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger said contract proposals submitted by the union would impose “real sacrifices on our members.”

On Wednesday the UAW abruptly cancelled a strike support rally set for April 18 in Detroit, citing “progress” in the talks. The calling off of the rally came as a surprise and slap in the face to American Axle workers, who were attempting to mobilize wide participation. Fear of a large turnout, not only of American Axle workers but other rank-and-file autoworkers, was undoubtedly a major factor in the decision by Solidarity House to scuttle the event. Since the walkout began in late February the UAW has done

everything it can to isolate and demoralize the strikers.

In any event, Gettelfinger made it clear the UAW bureaucracy never intended the rally as part of a serious effort to mobilize workers behind the strike, declaring in the previously cited op-ed piece, “We’d like nothing better than to cancel our rally because the strike was resolved by having a ratified contract.”

The cancellation of the support rally and continuing total information blackout imposed by the UAW International on the rank and file leave no doubt that the union is preparing an imminent betrayal.

The chief remaining issue to be resolved in the contract talks appears to be the division of the spoils between American Axle and General Motors. The axle maker was set up in 1994 after GM sold several axle and driveline factories to a group of private investors led by current American Axle CEO Richard Dauch. A report in the April 17 *Detroit Free Press* indicates that GM is resisting demands that it contribute toward “attrition packages” for American Axle workers. For its part the giant automaker expects American Axle to use part of the millions it gains from concessions to subsidize price reductions for the parts it supplies to GM assembly plants.

The UAW is moving to wrap up the strike even as the impact of the American Axle walkout is spreading.

Thirty GM plants have already been partially or totally shut down by the strike. According to *Automotive News*, the strike is beginning to have an impact on production of some of GM’s better selling models. Production of the Cadillac DTS and Buick Lucerne has been slowed at the Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant. Now it is reported that production of the HHR crossover is slowing at the GM facility in Ramos Arizipe, Mexico due to a parts shortage; the Saturn Vue could soon be impacted. Production of

Kodiak trucks in Silao, Mexico could also soon be slowed. GM also announced the cancellation of one shift of production at its Oshawa, Ontario car plant starting next week

On April 17, 2,600 workers at a GM plant outside of Lansing, Michigan struck over local issues. The facility builds the Buick Enclave, Saturn Outlook and GMC Acadia. A strike by workers at a local parts supplier had already slowed production at the plant.

The walkout undoubtedly reflects, at least in part, the enormous sympathy that exists among autoworkers for the American Axle strike. However, from the standpoint of the UAW the walkout is a cynical maneuver. By calling the strike the UAW is applying a little additional pressure on GM to help facilitate the sellout of American Axle workers by putting up money for buyouts as it did at auto parts maker Delphi last year.

With the majority of GM units yet to sign local agreements, the UAW could call a wave of crippling strikes. But it has no intention of doing this. The union recently withdrew a strike notice at a GM plant in Flint, Michigan that was set to walk out over local issues and put off threats of strikes at plants in Warren and Grand Rapids, Michigan while it continues to drag out talks.

After attempting to starve out workers, leaving them isolated on the picket line for two months surviving on a miserable \$200 a week strike paycheck, the UAW evidently calculates it is time to try to force through a vote on concessions.

American Axle workers cannot afford to wait while the UAW prepares to impose a sellout. They must form independent rank-and-file committees to campaign against any return to work without a contract and rejection of any concessions agreement.

They must take the initiative to spread the strike by appealing directly to workers at the Big Three auto plants, including their brothers and sisters in Canada and Mexico. They must fight to mobilize support independently of the UAW bureaucracy from throughout the working class, including unemployed and nonunion workers.

Massive support could be won for such a struggle because the fundamental issue in the strike, the right to earn a decent wage, is vital to the future of every worker. It comes amidst reports of hedge fund managers making billions of dollars off of a home

mortgage crisis that threatens millions with losing their homes.

The basic precondition for mounting such a campaign is for workers to put aside any illusions in the UAW. It has been transformed into a wealthy business enterprise, no less ruthlessly committed to the defense of capitalism and the suppression of the class struggle as American Axle CEO Richard Dauch. The union apparatus, from Gettelfinger down to the local level, is determined to crush this strike to prevent any precedent being set for a successful struggle.

Workers must be prepared to resist attempts by the UAW bureaucracy to organize a return to work and a hasty ratification vote and efforts by the UAW to mobilize its apparatus to pressure and intimidate opponents of a sellout.

However, militant action is not enough. A new political strategy is needed. American Axles workers are not simply in a battle against one employer, but confront a social and political system that is entirely hostile to the interests of millions of working people like themselves around the world.

Their struggle takes place in the midst of a presidential election campaign in which all the major party candidates pledge to continue spending hundreds of billions on the illegal occupation of Iraq while pledging next to nothing to healthcare, education or aid to homeowners facing foreclosure. Neither Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton nor John McCain have offered a word of support to the American Axle workers because they are all beholden to the interests of corporate America and its drive to make workers pay for the worsening economic crisis.

The working class must break with the Democrats and Republicans, the two parties of big business, and construct its own political party to wage a struggle against the profit system. This includes the fight for public ownership of the auto companies and other key industries under the democratic control of the working class in order to carry out the rational organization of production to meet human needs, not profit.



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