

Despite UAW wage-cut offers, no agreement yet in American Axle strike

Anger simmers over strike rally cancellation

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Talks ended Saturday between the United Auto Workers and American Axle without an agreement as the strike by 3,600 workers in Michigan and western New York nears completion of its second month, making it one of the longest auto strikes in decades.

Talks are set to continue this week, but management spokesperson Renee Rogers called speculation about a settlement “premature.” Earlier reports by the UAW had indicated an agreement was close with the auto parts maker. Questioned by reporters before a speech Saturday at a Democratic Party fundraising dinner, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger restated the readiness of the union bureaucracy to surrender substantial concessions while indicating a certain frustration. “I would hope we could resolve Axle, but we cannot negotiate an agreement with ourselves, it seems like it’s all give on our side.”

Meanwhile, negotiations continued over the weekend between the UAW and General Motors to resolve a series of local contract disputes. Twenty-six hundred UAW members walked out last week at an assembly plant near Lansing, Michigan, in a move apparently aimed at pressuring GM to help finance buyout and early retirement packages for American Axle workers. American Axle was set up in 1994 with factories spun off by GM.

Strike notices have been suspended at several other GM plants while negotiations continue. Consistent with its policy, the UAW shed no light in regard to the content of outstanding issues at either American Axle or GM. In the case of American Axle the UAW appears to be holding out for some kind of quid pro quo to secure its own financial interests in exchange for concessions. This may include guarantees that the

company will retain a minimum number of UAW dues-paying jobs at factories in the US.

The decision to call a token strike in Lansing follows the abrupt cancellation by the UAW of a scheduled April 18 strike support rally for American Axle workers in Detroit. The calling off of the rally angered American Axle workers, who were hoping to break out of the isolation imposed on their strike by the UAW.

The UAW justified the decision to call off the rally citing supposed progress in the talks. However, the remarks Saturday by Gettelfinger contradict that claim, underscoring the real reason for the cancellation—to continue the isolation of American Axle workers in order to break their resistance to management’s demands.

Around 200 workers attended a volatile union meeting at the UAW Local 235 hall in Detroit on Sunday. UAW International and local officials used evasions and excuses to try to placate workers angry over being kept in the dark by the union, the miserly strike benefits they are receiving and the decision of the UAW to cancel the support rally.

Outside the meeting union officials, including Local 235 President Adrian King and the local’s sergeant-at-arms, tried to physically intimidate supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* who were passing out a leaflet calling on workers to reject the UAW betrayal and elect a rank-and-file committee to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UAW. (*See accompanying video*)

Reflecting the general mistrust of the UAW, a motion was put forward by a rank-and-file worker not to return to work until ratification of the contract. The local leadership refused to put the motion to a vote, claiming

it would not send workers back to work before they voted on a new contract.

The cancelled rally was the first point on the agenda and was continually raised by workers over the course of the meeting. They were upset over the decision to cancel the event and the back-and-forth over this question lasted more than 45 minutes.

Union officials said the bargaining committee cancelled the rally as a good faith effort after management signalled they were ready to seriously negotiate. Afterwards the company refused to do so, and with no progress, the two sides suspended negotiations over the weekend. Union officials claimed they had been victims of a “dirty trick” by American Axle management.

This was an effort at selling a bill of goods. The last thing both the UAW and American Axle management wanted was a powerful expression of solidarity from other auto workers who have also been sold out by the union bureaucracy.

In place of mobilizing working class support behind striking workers, Local 235 leaders have called a rally to appeal to corporate shareholders who are meeting at American Axle’s headquarters on Thursday. But what is needed is not a futile appeal to shareholders but the mobilization of auto workers throughout the industry against the wage-cutting agreements accepted by the UAW.

The WSWS interviewed several workers on the American Axle picket line Friday. Most were angry over the cancellation of the strike support rally set for that day.

A worker with 32 years experience in the auto plants said he had been told about the cancellation of the rally by a UAW official. “They said they postponed it because [American Axle CEO Richard] Dauch didn’t want the publicity.” He continued. “They could have had 10,000 people. A lot of people were set to come down.”

About the UAW limiting strike pay to \$200 a week he remarked bitterly, “Other unions were willing to adopt us, but the UAW cut them out.”

He said that the fact the strike had lasted almost two months had come as a surprise to American Axle and the UAW. “I think they underestimated the younger people. They didn’t think we would fight so long.”

He agreed that a sellout deal was in the works. “I

think they will come in at the last minute and try and ram it down our throats—give us one or two minutes to decipher it. They [UAW officials] don’t even hardly come down here and walk with us.”

A younger skilled trades worker told the WSWS, “This is a significant time in the history of the auto economy. GM and Ford people should come out to support us.”

Like other workers he expressed bitterness over the decision by the UAW to cancel the strike support rally. “They even had it on the news that it was cancelled. They wanted it cancelled for sure.”

Another American Axle worker said, “I believe the rally would have drawn so much attention. But I think it was all part of a little stunt, like these strikes at GM, one plant strikes and the other one doesn’t.”

Doug told the WSWS, “You know Dauch doesn’t want the publicity. It tells me American Axle paid the UAW’s costs to call it off. They think we are lemmings. I heard that there was going to be quite a large number.

“There are indications out there that everything has been so planned. I have been reading the blogs, and there was news from another company that they are getting ready to ramp up production. In my opinion, this has been the longest Hollywood strike in history.

“Are they really at odds or working in concert? At the first of the year GM predicted a catastrophic financial loss for the first quarter. They can write all of this off.”



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