

Detroit: American Axle workers hold protest amidst heavy police presence

Shannon Jones
25 April 2008

Striking American Axle workers held a picket outside the company's headquarters Thursday afternoon ahead of a scheduled stockholders meeting.

The UAW local at the striking plants in Detroit called the protest, which drew about five hundred American Axle workers and supporters. The demonstration followed the cancellation by the UAW of a strike support rally set for last Friday in downtown Detroit.

Workers briefly blocked the entrance to American Axle headquarters before dozens of heavily armed police cleared the street. The crowd regrouped on the sidewalk in front of the headquarters before dispersing after about one hour. There were no reports of arrests. The police presence, however, was extremely heavy, in an evident attempt to intimidate the workers.

About 3,600 American Axle workers in Michigan and western New York have been on strike since late February. They are resisting demands by the auto parts supplier for wage cuts of up to 50 percent and a reduction in benefits.

Those participating in the protest evinced the determination of the working class not to surrender its hard won gains. However, local level UAW officials who attended the rally offered no policy to fight the attacks by American Axle other than hurling insults at CEO Richard Dauch. Workers continue to express frustration over the fact that they get no information from either the local or the international union about the content of negotiations. Reports in the media demonstrate that even prior to the strike the UAW had agreed to substantial concessions to the auto parts manufacturer.

The decision by the UAW to call off last week's scheduled rally has evidently emboldened American Axle to take an even harder line. In a press statement Tuesday the company demanded concessions

equivalent to those granted by the UAW to other parts suppliers and restated its threat to shut down production at the striking plants. "If the International UAW is not willing to consider a US market labor agreement...AAM will be forced to plan for the potential closure of some, or all of these uncompetitive facilities," the statement declared.

WSWS supporters distributed a leaflet at the rally titled, "Appeal to working class, not corporate shareholders, to back American Axle strike."

The statement called on American Axle workers to make a direct appeal to workers in the auto industry to carry out a struggle against the concessions accepted by the UAW.

The WSWS interviewed workers who attended the rally. Scott, a worker with 14 years seniority, told the WSWS that the turnout was "only a small percentage of what we could have gotten. We needed this demonstration to boost up morale, but I know that the shareholders don't care; they are with Dauch."

"They brought in the two-tier contract on us in 2004 and look at what is happening to the Big Three workers. They have it now. If we accept more concessions the same thing will happen to other workers. We have to take a stand against this."

Scott spoke about his previous experience in the auto parts industry. "I used to work for ITT Automotive. They went out of business in 1994. GM came in and said they were unprofitable. But what was happening was they were shifting production to other plants; we were paying for all the other plants they were building. They shut us down and moved all their operations to Ohio.

Scott said that workers saw signs that GM was preparing to resume operations at plants idled by the strike. "What is making it bad is that GM is getting

parts from other plants. I heard that Dana is retooling to make our axles. The truck plant in Arlington, Texas, is going back up. They say they are getting parts from an undisclosed source.”

“Sometimes I look at it and I think the union is selling us out,” Scott added. “They are walking this line and they are teetering, tottering. I heard they even accepted the \$14 before the strike. The only gripe was the buydown.”

Latanya Richardson, an American Axle worker with 13 years, told the WSWS, “What happens to us will have a major impact on what happens overall. Next they will go after others.”

Like many workers we spoke to, Latanya was angered by the decision of the UAW to call off the strike support rally set for last week. “It was a smack in the face. We were told we were close to something - then they cancelled it. I think it was to limit the exposure to us.”

She was also unhappy about the lack of information from the UAW. “We should know what we are getting into. The cost of living is getting worse. A lot of us are sole providers; we have a lot to lose. We want to maintain what we have established over the years. No one is getting rich. It just allows us to be comfortable.

“It is definite that they want to eliminate the middle class. They want to pay poverty wages for the working class.”

Alex Clements said there was growing frustration and tension among American Axle workers. “People are getting upset. We go back in there, and we won’t be able to buy the products we make.

“They cancelled the rally for no reason, they said they were close to an agreement—and then they said there was no agreement. I think it was a ploy or a trick.”

Alex felt that strike pay should be increased, given that the UAW had close to \$750 million in its strike fund. “What are they saving it for? An emergency? This is an emergency.”

A worker from Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly came to show his support for the American Axle workers. He noted the provocative police presence outside the American Axle corporate headquarters. “I think they are trying to incite something.”

He said that many workers had been prepared to attend the strike support rally in Detroit the previous week. “They cancelled that day’s rally and they would have had people from all over the country there.”

Latoya, who has worked at AAM for 10 years, said she would not accept having her standard of living cut in half, which would happen if the UAW accepted the cuts proposed by American Axle. “I am not willing to settle for just having a job,” she said. “We need jobs with decent wages.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact