

UAW president's radio comments underscore union-management gang-up against American Axle strikers

Jerry White
15 May 2008

Click here to download this article as a leaflet.

Over the weekend, United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger gave his most extensive comments to date on the American Axle strike during an interview with Detroit radio station WWJ.

Over 3,600 workers in Michigan and New York have been on strike for more than two-and-a-half months against the auto supplier's demand for drastic wage cuts and the elimination of at least 2,000 jobs.

The UAW president told auto reporter Jeff Gilbert that last week's announcement that General Motors had offered \$200 million to American Axle to help pay for buy-outs and buy-downs had not led to a quick settlement, as many had anticipated. Instead, American Axle responded to GM's move with even greater concession demands, Gettelfinger said, including the closure of the Cheektowaga, New York machining plant, which employs 116 workers in the Buffalo area.

This demand, he said, "came totally out of left field." The company "gave every indication we were extremely close on an agreement" last Friday afternoon, he continued, but after he and other top UAW negotiators came back from dinner "the company gave us a notice that they were going to close the Cheektowaga plant."

Gettelfinger said he was shocked that company negotiators had answered every concession offer by the UAW with even more egregious demands.

But why should this come as a surprise?

From the beginning of this struggle, American Axle CEO Richard Dauch has proceeded with utter ruthlessness. He has repeatedly threatened to shut his US plants and move production to Mexico unless workers accept a 50 percent wage cut. The company has threatened to hire scabs and has kept workers on the streets for nearly twelve weeks to achieve its demands.

What is behind Gettelfinger's incredulity? It is true that the UAW bureaucracy—which for years has promoted the nostrums of labor-management "unity"—has hardly distinguished itself for its powers of foresight and strategic thinking. However, another, at least equally probable, explanation is that he is feigning shock as part of an effort to condition strikers to accept as inevitable the sellout agreement being prepared.

Gettelfinger all but boasted that the union was ready to accede to the bulk of the company's demands. He said, "We have literally made hundreds of changes in this contract and throughout these negotiations ... all to the company's advantage." He added, "In the past two years, mid-contract, we agreed to Buffalo being phased out. And that's a major savings to the company." He was referring to the closing of a plant which once employed over 2,000 UAW workers.

"We also negotiated a two-tier wage agreement," Gettelfinger continued, "and we agreed to buyouts to help them. And if you look at the proxy statement that was filed by American Axle, the chairman and CEO's pay was based on the improvements made in that contract."

In other words, well before negotiations began for the current contract, the UAW had imposed draconian concessions on its members that guaranteed multi-million-dollar payouts to Dauch and other top executives.

In the current talks, Gettelfinger acknowledged, the UAW had already accepted the company's demands to close the Tonawanda, New York and Detroit forges, eliminating another 760 jobs.

The union had also accepted huge wage cuts. Gettelfinger said the UAW had agreed to a separate contract at the Three Rivers, Michigan plant, which would impose even deeper wage cuts than the estimated \$5-\$8 an hour cut for workers in Detroit.

“[I]n Three Rivers,” Gettelfinger said, “members of our bargaining committee, in order to save that facility, have agreed to a wage rate that is so low that they will have to work for six months just to earn what the company gave their board of directors in an increase on their retention pay which is, \$10,000.”

Here you have the president of the UAW—who nominally represents half a million auto workers—declaring in his defense that he has agreed to wages for American Axle workers that are below the official poverty level for a family of four—\$21,200 a year, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services.

How can a union that carries out measures that impoverish its own members be defined as a workers’ organization?

From the beginning, the UAW has negotiated concessions behind the backs of the members, forced strikers to subsist on poverty-level strike benefits and deliberately kept the struggle isolated. Far from opposing wage cuts, the UAW has imposed such cuts on workers throughout the auto industry in order to boost the profitability of the corporations.

Every word out of the mouth of the UAW president drips with cowardice and prostration before the interests of corporate America. There is not a trace of class consciousness or working class solidarity in these remarks. On the contrary, they underscore the unbridgeable chasm that exists between workers and the privileged bureaucracy that controls the UAW.

Whatever complaints Gettelfinger made about “greedy bosses” were combined with nationalist poison. Thus, Gettelfinger told the interviewer, “We’re dealing with some very, very greedy people here. In fact, I’m not sure how they could even call themselves ‘American’ Axle anymore. To me, it’s more like ‘Axle, Mexico and elsewhere.’”

Hostile to any struggle to unite US and Mexican workers against the globally-organized auto giants, the UAW wants to convince its members that they have no choice but to accept far lower wages in order to retain US manufacturing jobs. This is the overriding concern of the UAW, which is dedicated not to the jobs, conditions and living standards of auto workers, but rather to the maintenance of an income stream for the union bureaucracy from union dues.

For all of its treachery, the UAW has not been able to crush the resistance of the American Axle strikers. The bureaucracy’s biggest worry is its ability to force through

a sellout agreement in the face of rank-and-file opposition. Gettelfinger acknowledged this in a second interview Sunday on WJR radio, saying, “Look, let’s not kid anybody here. No matter what we do as a result of these negotiations it is going to be difficult to get ratified.”

Those in the know in the corporate boardrooms and Detroit news media see Gettelfinger’s remarks as an effort to lower expectations, demoralize the strikers and present a sellout as a *fait accompli*.

Detroit Free Press columnist Tom Walsh, in a comment Tuesday entitled “UAW’s Wrath Sends a Signal,” noted the cynical motives behind Gettelfinger’s radio appearances. The union president, he wrote, “wants Axle strikers and every UAW member within earshot of a Detroit radio station to know that these are brutally tough negotiations; that the company can close plants at home and build parts in Mexico or somewhere else, because it has happened before. He’s creating an expectation for the rank-and-file—if it wasn’t there already—that the next contract will be a bitter pill for American Axle workers to swallow.

“And then hopefully in the next few days, Gettelfinger can surprise them with positive news. Like an end to the strike sooner than expected. Maybe a deal to keep the Cheektowaga plant open. Or a \$5,000 signing bonus, plus big checks to ease the transition to retirement or a lower-wage job.”

Getting the contract ratified at American Axle is much harder than the union’s efforts on behalf of GM, Ford and Chrysler last year, Walsh noted, because the UAW is now asking current workers to vote “in favor of slashing their own pay.”

For Gettelfinger, he continued, “to succeed in the tricky business of getting a concessionary contract at American Axle ratified, he must be the one to set the expectations if he hopes to be able to exceed them when he takes a tentative deal to the members.” Speaking for the corporate and political establishment in Detroit, Walsh concluded, “The hope here, for the future of all parties involved, is that he pulls it off.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact