

Michigan GM worker answers attack by New York Times columnist

Jerry White

27 November 2008

On Tuesday, November 18, the *New York Times* published an article by one of its leading business columnists, Andrew Ross Sorkin, which places the blame for the downfall of General Motors on the supposedly “gold-plated” and “off-the-charts” wages and benefits of auto workers.

The article, entitled, “A Bridge Loan? This Company Needs to Go Chapter 11,” calls for a government-sponsored bankruptcy of GM to “do tough things they could never do in the normal course of business.” This would include forcing a merger with Chrysler, shutting down half of the combined companies’ 35 assembly plants and tearing up existing labor contracts in order to slash wages and benefits.

Sorkin complains that workers at GM and the other Detroit auto makers are paid “\$10 to \$20 an hour more than people who do the same job building cars in the United States for foreign makers like Toyota.” Even the massive concessions handed over by the United Auto Workers union in the 2007 contract—which cut new-hires’ wages by half and gutted employer paid medical and pension benefits—were “not nearly enough,” he says.

In the course of the article, Sorkin singles out the remarks of a GM worker in Michigan. “Part of the problem,” he complains, “is summed up by comments like this one in The Detroit Free Press, made by Kandy O’Neill, 39, an assembler at G.M.’s plant in Lake Orion, Mich., where she builds the Chevy Malibu and Pontiac G6. ‘I think we’ve given enough,’ she said about the cuts to her salary and pension plan.

“‘Everybody wants to come down hard on the workers,’ she said. ‘Nobody knows what we do inside there but the people who work there. It’s hard. It is not an easy job.’

“When you read a line like that you might sympathize with her,” Sorkin continues, “but then you realize that nothing can be accomplished without bankruptcy.”

Sorkin added, “Ms. O’Neill: your company is asking the taxpayers—many of whom don’t have health care coverage—to pay your salary and health insurance.”

Coming as it does, in the context of the government handing trillions of dollars to Wall Street bankers and financial speculators, the effort to smear auto workers as greedy is truly amazing.

For Sorkin the problem is not the avarice and recklessness of the financial elite, which has brought the world economy to the brink of catastrophe. Instead, he claims, the problem is the unsustainable living standards of the working class. Society simply cannot afford it!

It is not that Sorkin is evil or bad; it is likely he did not even think twice about the social consequences of the measures he advocates. Such callousness and lack of empathy are characteristic of an entire social milieu, which became extremely wealthy during the years of the stock market and financial boom.

The son of a partner in a high-powered New York City law firm which specializes in mergers and acquisitions, by the time Sorkin—now 31—was in his 20s he had become a rising star for the *New York Times*. He rose to the position of assistant editor of its business and finance news section, became a regular columnist and editor of the online financial news service he founded—*Dealbook*—which the *Times* hailed as “a dynamic new way for Wall Street power players to get the news they need to compete in today’s tough marketplace.”

These titles would earn him anywhere from \$150,000 to \$300,000, and a book deal about the Wall Street crisis is reportedly on the way.

It may be easy for the *Times* columnist to insert the remarks of Kandy O’Neill into his article and single them out for criticism, but what does he know about the real living conditions of such workers? The universe he inhabits is entirely alien to the realities that confront tens of millions of ordinary working people like her.

Kandy O’Neill speaks out

The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Ms. O’Neill to find out more about her life. She invited us to her home in the small, semi-rural town of Goodrich, Michigan about 50 miles north of Detroit and just outside of Flint, the birthplace of GM and the UAW. There are only a few thousand GM workers left in Flint, compared to 100,000 at its peak.

As we approached her small ranch house, one of dozens of modest homes on the street, Kandy greeted us at the door. She introduced us to her husband Phil—also a GM worker—who apologized for having to continue working on the windows in the living room and kitchen. Kandy explained they were finally getting around to replacing the old windows—which had long been covered with plastic—in order to cut down on heating costs.

“Everybody thinks GM workers are living high off the hog, the way the *New York Times* puts it,” she said. “We don’t make too much money. We make an honest wage for working hard. I come home everyday smelling like oil.”

Kandy is a fifth generation auto worker who has worked at GM's Lake Orion plant for eight years. Her husband has been there a year. They have two children, Caitlin, 5, and Ashley, 15.

She laughed at the suggestion that they had a privileged lifestyle. "We don't have 'gold-plated' wages and benefits," she said. "Wall Street has golden parachutes, don't they? We take care of our children and pay the bills. You can see we don't live in a half-million-dollar home.

"Our health care benefits have already been cut. You only get five office visits covered and then you have to pay out of pocket what the doctor wants." She explained that her 15-year-old was doing very well in school but she and her husband worried whether they will be able to afford college.

"We are not quite living paycheck to paycheck but it's close. We don't take vacations. The last trip we made was up north in Michigan to Traverse City—that was like a honeymoon because we couldn't afford one when we got married. Once we took the kids to Florida to Disney World but we stayed with cousins to save money. We're not whooping it up like AIG executives who are making millions and going on trips with taxpayer money."

The talk of new demands for cuts in pensions and retiree health benefits was traumatizing her parents too, she said. "My dad worked for GM for 37 years and he is worried about losing his health care benefits. My mom retired last year from nursing, and she's looking for another job just to make sure they have insurance. She's nothing but doom and gloom these days, telling us to prepare for a GM bankruptcy, cut down on our expenses and put aside money.

"Now they want to cut our wages like they did the American Axle workers. How are we supposed to survive? Our food, energy and health care bills aren't going down. The new hires at GM have had their wages cut in half to \$14 an hour and they get 401(k)s instead of company-paid pensions." Their retirement money, she said, is being wiped out in the stock market.

Kandy said the *Times* article had been re-published in the *Flint Journal*. "My mother read it and said 'what a hateful man.' To me, he is making a six-digit salary and doesn't know what we go through.

"Sorkin complains about the taxpayers bailing out the auto industry. Well, we're taxpayers and I don't recall anybody coming to me to ask whether I approved a bailout for Wall Street so the executives could take their trips and get their big bonuses. These people are making tens of millions of dollars every year. How much does a person like that need? And they still want more.

"Since when did Wall Street take over America? Hundreds of billions were handed to the banks but they are attacking the auto industry, which is just seeking a loan. Sure, the auto executives shouldn't have flown to Washington in private jets but are you telling me [Democratic Congressional leaders] Pelosi and Reid don't know that the executives from AIG do that every day? Isn't that what Paulson does? I thought the Democrats were supposed to be for the working people. They are coming down on the auto executives but they are really aiming at the workers.

"They are saying the auto industry's problems are our fault because we didn't build the right product. But we weren't the ones making the decisions. Nobody asked the workers if we should build a car that gets 16 miles per gallon.

"The bankruptcy of the auto industry will hit everybody. Teachers will be hurt if people lose their jobs and pull their kids out of school. The restaurants will fail. The working middle class will be wiped out. If we lose our jobs, we'll lose our homes and that is really going to drive up foreclosures. Don't they know this or is it that they just don't care?

"It's already getting bad around here. People have had their homes foreclosed on this block and the next one. Crime is going to increase. Some kids broke into a truck and robbed a woman's purse. They didn't take the credit cards, just \$30 in cash. That's how desperate it is around here."

Kandy expressed the determination of auto workers to fight to defend what generations of auto workers struggled to achieve.

"Everything we have our ancestors fought for in the sit-down strikes in Flint and other struggles. The workers had no rights and had to fight for better working conditions.

She expressed reservations about the role of the union in the strike of American Axle workers earlier this year. "When the American Axle workers were on strike we were all hoping they weren't going to give in. We had collections in the plant during the three-month strike but the union was only giving them \$200 a week even though the strike fund had almost a billion dollars in it.

"My great grandmother, who worked at GM, reused tin foil and the plastic bags bread came in because she remembered how bad the Great Depression was. She told us stories about the 1930s and how women stood in line with their kids waiting for food while their husbands were working or looking for jobs.

"It is sad to think that we could be headed for that again. They are even saying sales of spam are up again. The working class is going to have to fight against this. It looks like it is going to have to take a revolution to change things. That is increasingly what people inside the plant are saying."

Postscript: The WSWWS sought to contact Andrew Sorkin for this article. We offered to come to his Manhattan apartment to do a profile of the way he lives but he did not reply to our email or phone messages.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact