

WSWS speaks to Chrysler workers on plant closures

Tom Eley
19 December 2008

On Wednesday, Chrysler LLC said it would stop auto production at all of its facilities in North America for at least one month, beginning Friday. It is possible that many if not all of these plants will remain closed permanently. On Thursday, the *World Socialist Web Site* sent a team of reporters to talk to Chrysler workers about the closures and the crisis in the auto industry.

There are more indications the third-largest US automaker is nearing liquidation. Chrysler's financial wing has told dealers it is likely to suspend loans utilized by dealers to put new cars in showrooms. It will also start to charge fees to dealers who have been unable to sell new cars that have been in stock for more than 360 days. General Motors has quickly squelched rumors that Cerberus Capital Management, Chrysler's owner, has restarted merger negotiations with GM.

On December 6, Chrysler retained Jones Day, a leading bankruptcy law firm. Should Chrysler enter bankruptcy court, it is likely that it will be totally liquidated. A "prepackaged" or "orderly" bankruptcy, the avenue evidently favored by the Bush administration, would very likely result in a shotgun marriage of Chrysler to GM and the destruction of most plants and jobs at both. Under this scenario, the industry would continue to operate, but under the control of a bankruptcy judge who would have the power to cut wages and conditions beyond the drastic measures already put on the table by the UAW.

Over the past two weeks, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party have been visiting auto factories to discuss the crisis in the auto industry with workers. They have distributed statements by the WSWS on developments in the auto industry, building for a

meeting of autoworkers and Detroit-area residents to be held at Wayne State University in Detroit on Saturday.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers at Chrysler's Warren Truck plant near Detroit. The factory employs about 4,000 workers, and is part of the expansive Dodge City complex. Workers reacted to the news that Chrysler is shutting down 30 plants for one month and that the Bush administration is considering structured bankruptcy for the auto companies.

Arslan told the WSWS, "It is weird that they are getting all the workers out of the plants at one time. They will then threaten our SUB pay [supplemental unemployment benefits] to get workers to take concessions. They will say 'bankruptcy' to threaten us and get people scared.

"They are going to push for this bankruptcy, they are going for a merger—they are getting the paperwork together. I am prepared for the worst, but \$14 an hour is not enough to make a living. Some people say they will get a job on the side—roofing or carpentry—but who is hiring?"

"You sit there listening to the news, and you realize most of it is propaganda. They are willing to help the banks, but they show polls claiming the public is against bailing out the auto companies."

Paul, a worker with 16 years at Warren Truck, denounced the UAW. "The union is just a business," he said. "It's not about protecting us. Now that they've taken control of the VEBA and all—it's just another business

He continued, "I know a couple of guys lost \$30,000 in a month from their 401(k)s. We're all losing money,

and when you lose that, what do you have to fall back on? Nothing. Once they get our wages down to \$14-\$18 an hour, it will be like McDonalds. It used to be easy to get a job. If you didn't like working in one place, you could get a job somewhere else where you liked it better. Not any more."

John, a worker with 32 years, expressed anger over government demands for concessions. "The stuff we have given up is outrageous. When we [took cuts] in the 1980s and 1990s, it wasn't this bad," he said. "Our government is basically throwing us into the street. You see the rhetoric from the White House and Senate. They are plotting to eliminate us. They would like to have every worker working for minimum wage.... We thought it was bad when we heard about kids shooting someone for their shoes. Conditions are going to get even worse than that."

John also expressed his anger over the role of the UAW bureaucracy. "The UAW gave up at least \$20 billion of what was owed to the workers—that was our death notice," John said. "All the UAW does is make sure they get their money. I haven't heard of one thing they gave back. I haven't heard about [union officials] having their healthcare cut."

"I am seeing a lot more of the UAW manipulating people to agree to terms we would have never thought possible years ago. People are afraid and don't always understand what they are doing."

Commenting on the Obama administration, John added, "They give you what will please the masses, but can he deliver? You know where your enemies are coming from, but what about your supposed friends?"

Brian, a worker with 21 years at Warren Truck, told a WSWS reporter that workers would no longer be able to afford the cars they build—once a hallmark of the "Fordist" economy. "We make all the sacrifices, and they expect us to make a living on the peanuts," he said. "If they keep cutting our wages, who do they think is going to buy these vehicles? At \$13-\$14 an hour, you can't maintain a new vehicle."

Bryan, a worker with 15 years said, "There is not a good mood inside the plant. Everybody is worried

about their jobs. We've invested a lot here. American Express was a credit card company but turned into a bank to receive some of the bailout money. Everyone is dipping their hands into the pot—but they are sticking it to the little guy."

Linda, a worker with 13 years who formerly worked in the Chrysler corporate offices but now works in the plant, told the WSWS, "I think the union gives up too many concessions. What's happening wasn't our fault to begin with."

"If we go down to one shift, what will happen to me? I will go on indefinite layoff, even with 13 years' seniority. Not only that, but I will probably be without SUB pay, because they are talking about getting rid of SUB pay."

Another Warren Truck worker, Charles, expressed a sharply shifting mood among workers toward the government. "If you want my honest opinion, I think if the government doesn't turn around and they don't help the auto industry out, there's going to be a revolution in this country. The people are just going to look at their family and say, 'I can't afford to feed you and so I'm going to have to go out and make something happen.' And they're going to get together and overthrow the government. Just like in revolutionary times. Its taxation without representation. Even though you have representatives, they're not representing your interests They're representing big corporation's interests. Not the people."

"It may have to come to that again. We may have another revolution before this all gets straightened out. But hopefully, it can be straightened out without that, because peace is always better than violence. But it may take violent overthrow to make things come around. That's my opinion on it."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact