

Detroit area electricians protest job cuts

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The official jobless rate in Michigan is 10.6 percent the highest in the nation. Construction workers have been particularly hard hit due to the collapse of the housing market and the reduction in new building.

Approximately 50 members of local 58 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) union held a protest this week at a non-union construction site in Birmingham, Michigan, just north of Detroit, where a doctor's office is using low-wage workers to carry out renovations on a new office.

A union representative said there were over 1,600 members of the union without jobs. The protest, he said, had been called to draw attention to the unemployed union workers.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 800,000 construction jobs were lost in the last two years. The unemployment level in the construction industry nationally is 15.3 percent, the highest of any sector of the national economy.

The Commerce Department reported last week that US builders broke ground on 550,000 houses in December, the fewest in five decades of government statistics. The recent spate of layoffs represent "structural, not cyclical changes to the economy," said Peter Morici, a professor at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland to *BusinessWeek*. "They're the hallmark of depression."

In Michigan the cuts in the auto industry have continued unabated. On Monday, General Motors announced 2,000 more layoffs, including the elimination of the second shift of a plant near Lansing, Michigan, and on Wednesday GM said it was canceling

plans to build a new engine plant in Flint, Michigan.

Michigan also has the highest foreclosure rate in the country with 126 homes being foreclosed each day.

One of the pickets in the protest, Joel Gumbetter told the WSWs he and his fellow workers were really hurting economically. "The unemployment sucks," stated Gumbetter who has worked as a licensed electrician for 12 years. He has been laid off for over a year and is only able to get by because of the temporary extension on unemployment benefits.

"We are lucky to work 2-6 months a year," he continued. "It's tough. I haven't worked since November 2007. The extension is the only thing that has kept me afloat."

"You want to know what my New Year's resolution was? It was to get a job. I never thought I would be in this situation. I always thought I would be able to work. I thought it was good. But you could begin to see it go down in 2003-04."

Other workers expressed similar sentiments. "We are all suffering here," stated another older worker. "It's bad, especially in Michigan. In all the years I have been working I don't think I have ever seen anything like this. Look at what is happening in the auto industry."

Gumbetter, echoed the feelings. "They knew what they were doing when they hit the Big Three," referring to the government's demands that workers accept massive wage cuts in exchange for the federal loans to the auto industry.

There is a widespread feeling of anger against the

hostile treatment of ordinary workers compared to the trillion-dollar bailout of the Wall Street bankers. “Nothing is being done for the worker,” said another picket, “everything today goes for the rich.”



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