

“A war waged by the rich against the poor”

Ford workers oppose new concessions

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2 March 2009

Workers at Ford Motor Company attended informational meetings and voted this weekend on proposals by the United Auto Workers (UAW) to reopen the 2007 contract to impose new concessions. Meetings and voting will continue through next week as the union rushes to meet the March 31 deadline, imposed by the Obama administration, for restructuring the US auto industry to achieve profitability.

A document circulated by the UAW to summarize and justify this latest round of concessions opened with a letter signed by Ron Gettelfinger, UAW president, and Bob King, UAW vice president for Ford. They begin by citing the global crisis of capitalism. "Because of the current global banking and financial crisis," they argue, "*no further private financing is available.*"

Without explanation, as if there were no alternative, the union officials accept the demands of Wall Street and the new administration. "Without substantial restructuring," they continue, "... Ford cannot survive on a long-term basis." After the usual claims of equality of sacrifice, the bureaucrats conclude that workers must take their medicine so that Ford, and by the logic of the argument, global capitalism itself, can return to profitability.

Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on Saturday and Sunday opposed the concessions. "I'm most worried about the overall implications of it," said Jim at Wayne Assembly in Wayne, Michigan. "If they cut out the middle class worker," he explained, "all that will be left are the very rich and the very poor. There is already a war being waged by the rich against the poor."

Auto workers are well aware that the wages of other workers, as well as the living standards of broad layers of small business owners, rest on the gains that were

won through the historical struggles of industrial workers. "It is bad for everybody," Jim said. "The people who have mom-and-pop shops will not have any business when the union jobs are gone. There is no security for anyone."

The proposal would eliminate cost-of-living pay, which averages over \$100.00 per week for each worker, performance bonuses and Christmas bonuses. Supplemental unemployment benefits will also be slashed. The most far-reaching attack comes in the form of a restructuring of the Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (VEBA)—the multi-billion dollar fund placed under union control in the last contract to provide for retiree medical benefits. Ford will save almost \$7 billion this year by substituting stock transfers for cash payments into the retiree medical fund.

This will mean a sharp attack on retiree benefits, organized by the UAW. Under the proposed changes, the committee that controls payments from the VEBA will be authorized to cut benefit payments beginning in January of 2010, as opposed to the original date of January 2012. "In view of the dramatic and unexpected losses in the investment markets during 2008," states the union document, "it is important that the committee has the flexibility to make sure that the level of benefits provided by the VEBA is consistent with the levels in the VEBA."

Another Wayne Assembly worker, Mike Hall, told the WSWs, "This contract is wrong. The last three or four years have been concessions over and over again. We are going down and down and keep losing money. The people who are negotiating this tell you that it's in our best interest to vote for this contract, but I don't see how it is in our best interests. It must be in *their* best

interests.

"I'll vote how I want. I'll stand my ground," Mike said. "I do not see any of the banks giving up; I don't see the lawmakers giving up. People have finally had it up to here.

"COLA [cost-of-living adjustment] was won in the 1960s. My friend's father was one of those who were out on strike for over three months. Finally, they won it. What it took them three months to win, we are supposed to give up in a day? I have a bad feeling about this vote because they always come back and say 'yes'."

At the informational meeting for workers at the Ford Rouge plant in Detroit, Michigan, Robert, a worker with 35 years seniority, spoke to the WSWS. "The UAW is telling us if we don't give it up we are going to lose our jobs. I am particularly concerned about the young people. They are really going to be hurt in this deal," he said.

"They always blame the workers for what is going wrong in the auto industry. We just do our jobs. When they get into trouble they just want to take away from us. It should start on the top. When they give big bonuses to the people on top it is a way of saying that workers don't matter," he said.

Speaking on the changes in retiree health fund, Robert said, "I work in the stamping plant. We put the weather stripping on doors. The workers who have worked all these years expect their pensions and healthcare to be there for them when they retire."

Robert also spoke about the severity of the economic crisis and its impact on working people. "If you continue to take away from the people, who is going to be left who can afford to buy the cars? The American worker is going to become extinct. Plants are closing - there are so many foreclosures - this is the worst I've ever seen.

"When my grandfather came here, jobs were plentiful. It has been steadily going down since then. In Detroit it is getting to be like it was in Mississippi when I left the South. My wife lost her job at Macy's. People are struggling to survive. It's worldwide."

Jack, who has 28 years in the plant, noted that the companies are targeting higher-paid workers with more

seniority. "Anybody with seniority doesn't have a chance. They will force you out. I know a guy who came over from the truck plant with 40 years seniority. He is working in trim, which is one of the hardest places you can be. If they want to get rid of you, they will find a way. They can pull you in for a physical and find that you're not capable of doing the work. They are getting rid of people to save money. We have outside contractors doing the cleanup for \$11 up to \$14 and they are members of the union."

Earl Harvester, who has worked at Ford for 35 years, said, "With this contract, there won't be much left after retirement, no pension, no health benefits. Is the union playing into the company, or what? Yes they are. Everything we have is now on the table again."

A concerned UAW Local 900 member told the WSWS that he asked union officials if he could watch the vote count to make sure it was legitimate. "I was told 'no.' The vice president said I couldn't challenge the vote, the local would be all locked up and only two people could watch. So therefore it will be a 'yes' vote.

"The rich never pay," he added. "It will always be the working class. The bottom line is that if Ford goes under, we're out anyway. We gave and gave and gave. However, via text messages, I've heard that our 'friends' on the riverfront [UAW Headquarters Solidarity House is on the Detroit River] are slated for a 3 percent pay increase next week. Maybe you can check that out.

"Here it will be that if you don't take the buyout, you'll be pushed out. It's union-busting, big time and it sure seems like the union is part of it."

Supporters of the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement to Ford workers calling for a rejection of the UAW betrayal. (See, "Reject UAW sellout at Ford! Mobilize autoworkers to defend jobs and living standards!")



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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