

As Chrysler shutter its factories

Workers denounce UAW concessions

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Chrysler employees arrived at their factories to find production stopped and cars covered in plastic on Friday, less than two days after a concessions contract pushed through by the United Auto Workers.

Chrysler began bankruptcy proceedings on Thursday. After initially announcing that production would stop next week, Chrysler moved to suspend production indefinitely at all its facilities in the US and Canada pending judicial hearings.

Chrysler announced on Friday that it would permanently close five active plants—two in the Detroit area (Sterling Heights Assembly and Conner Assembly); an engine plant in Kenosha, Wisconsin; an assembly plant in St. Louis, Missouri; and a stamping plant in Twinsburg, Ohio—by the end of 2010 and possibly much earlier. It will also close three plants that are already idled.

While these plants are the most immediately threatened, it is impossible to say how many workers in all will find themselves out of work. What is clear is that workers who remain in the restructured Chrysler will be subject to significantly reduced benefits and far worse conditions.

The company said that it would file a motion by Saturday to sell most of its assets to Fiat. It claimed that all workers at the closed plants would be offered work at other facilities, but the restructuring will lead to the elimination of thousands of jobs.

Workers received details of new contract revisions on Tuesday, less than 24 hours before the vote was scheduled to take place. The UAW told workers that accepting the contract would save jobs, and UAW president Ron Gettelfinger said on Thursday that the revisions passed with an 80 percent majority.

The Obama administration announced the company's

bankruptcy on Thursday, blaming the move on a group of bondholders that declined a deal negotiated by the White House. In fact, the bankruptcy is the product of the administration's demand that Chrysler be restructured in order to meet the needs of Wall Street.

The whole process, from contract announcement, vote, bankruptcy filing, to plant closure took less than four days. Several Chrysler workers said the process appeared to be a stage-managed plan by the UAW, Chrysler, and the Obama Administration.

Major concessions in the new contract include an immediate cut in retiree health care; the elimination of cost of living adjustments (COLA) and supplemental unemployment benefits; limits on vacation time, and the expansion of part-time and temporary labor.

The UAW will emerge as the majority shareholder of Chrysler, owning 55 percent of the company's equity, and will hold a non-voting seat on the board of directors.

Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* were distraught and angered by the news. Glenn, a worker at the Warren Truck Assembly plant near Detroit, said the UAW misled autoworkers. "They kept promising us that if we passed this contract, they wouldn't go into bankruptcy. Then the very next day this comes out."

"Everybody I know voted against the contract. They might as well have put all our ballots in the trash," he said.

Glenn said that all the vehicles had been wrapped in plastic, which he had never seen before. "We've shut down for changeovers before, but there have never been these kinds of preparations. Nobody knows what to expect or what's going on," he said.

Todd, another worker at Warren Truck, said, "This is just another step to get rid of our pay and wages and

bring in new hires at \$14 an hour.”

“Everything we find out and hear, we find out from the news,” he said. “Why isn’t somebody from the plant telling us what is going on, whether it is union or management or something? Somebody knows. It makes me feel like everyone is out to get us.”

Todd said he had no idea when workers would go back to work, if ever. “The union said Thursday that they didn’t know what would happen. We walk in on Friday and everything is covered up, and then they said that we had to leave. We got a layoff and no return to work date. The union, who you can’t really believe now, says we will be back in 5 weeks. If that is the case, why are we not getting a return to work date? They didn’t tell us anything. Just, ‘See you guys later.’”

Like many workers, Todd worried about the fate of his family. “The rich people say you got to spend money to make money; well, the truth is you have to make money to spend money. We work just to survive. Are poor people not allowed to have children or families? Is that what they mean when they say that you shouldn’t live beyond their means? We can’t give our kids a decent education?”

Donna, another worker at Warren Truck, said she was “devastated” by the news of bankruptcy. “We did everything they asked us to, and look what the bondholders did; they drove the company into bankruptcy. Every time we give them something, it is only another reason for them to take more.”

She complained that the UAW did not tell the workers anything. “The union—the corporation’s right hand man—that is what we call them. Just today I heard a steward tell five different people five different stories. They don’t know anything. Oh, and just recently, our union dues were raised.”

The WSWs also interviewed workers outside a UAW information meeting at the local for the Jefferson Assembly Plant in Detroit on Wednesday, prior to the bankruptcy announcement. Workers came out of the union hall carrying the contract descriptions and sullen looks.

David said, “The elite in society wants to make all the money they can, and they’re going to do it by whatever means they can get away with. That’s what’s happening now.”

He denounced the contract and the UAW, saying:

“Unless we stand up for what we believe in, this kind of stuff is going to continue to happen. I can vote no all I want, but is it going to change anything? I don’t think so. The UAW isn’t looking out for us any more; they’re not looking out for the workers like they should be doing, they’re looking out for themselves and their perks.”

David added, “American Axle was on strike for four months. And now what are they doing: closing down all of their factories. That’s the same thing that’s going to happen to GM and Chrysler and Ford.”

“What’s the use of being in a union? They don’t protect you anyway. I could do better if I just stop paying union dues.”

Jackee, who has worked at Chrysler for fifteen years, said that the retirees would be the worst affected by the contract. “They did the retirees wrong; they cut too many of their benefits. Now they’re trying to force us out, who are making \$30 an hour, in order to get new hires in there at \$14 per hour.”

“They just gave American Axle workers a buy down for \$105,000. And now they’re going to shut the plant down and move it to Mexico. The union told us ‘vote or you won’t have a job.’ It’s the union leadership that’s responsible for all this. They want the rank-and-file to back them. But you can’t back people who don’t have your best interests in mind. And they don’t.”



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