

WSWS speaks to workers who exposed GM payoff to Canadian auto union

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with two workers at a General Motors transmission plant in Windsor, Ontario, who have been involved in exposing and campaigning against a secret agreement between GM and Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) officials at the plant. The deal increased the pay and retirement benefits of several CAW Local 1973 officials, while rank-and-file workers were being forced to take major concessions.

GM management was forced to annul a secret memorandum of understanding with local officials after rank-and-file workers launched a campaign to recall shop committee members who benefited from the sweetheart deal.

Under the terms of the local or “backyard” deal, GM secretly increased the pay of five full-time CAW representatives at the plant by transferring them into a premium skilled-trade job classification. The classification had been rendered defunct as a result of the concessions the CAW granted GM in the 2008.

The pay increase of \$3.50 per hour was timed to boost the CAW officials’ pension entitlement by an extra \$500 per month and could have resulted in each of the five officials receiving as much as \$125,000 in additional wage and pension earnings if they survived until age 75.

The Local 1973 bureaucrats were awarded this deal shortly after they had joined with the rest of the CAW apparatus in insisting that GM Canada workers twice reopen the collective agreement and accept massive concessions so as to clear the way for the taxpayer-funded bailout of GM by the Canadian and Ontario governments. The deal, pushed through by the CAW last spring, freezes wages and cost-of-living allowances until 2012, increases out-of-pocket health care expenses for current and retired workers, guts long-standing work rules and paves the way for further plant closings and layoffs.

On October 15, two of the CAW officials who had benefited from the deal assaulted Gene Locknick, a recent retiree from the plant, as he passed out leaflets opposing the deal, including an article by the WSWS to workers on the morning shift. (See, “Workers expose GM payoff to Canadian auto union officials”)

The following eyewitness account of the attack was sent to the WSWS: “A retired GM Windsor Transmission Plant worker, while on public property handing out leaflets with verbatim news write-ups from the *Windsor Star* and WSWS to incoming dayshift workers and standing directly in front of the main entrance and

GM Security, was assaulted by two shop committee members who were en route from the GM Parking to the front main entrance of the plant.

“The two union reps, Todd Smith and Jim McCabe... began to attack the retiree with a vicious and profane verbal assault right in his face screaming at the top of their lungs. One of the union reps hit Locknick in the stomach before they left and went into the plant. Smith and McCabe have been known in past and in more recent incidences to harass and assault workers.”

The WSWS spoke with Locknick and John, another long-time GM transmission worker who chose not to give his last name because of the danger of victimization by management and the CAW. The following is an exchange between WSWS reporters and the two workers.

WSWS: How have conditions changed since the 1980s?

Gene: We’ve seen conditions in the plant and the CAW go downhill all the way.

John: I’ve never seen conditions like this before. There is no union in there. The CAW reps say you should be happy you still have a job. They get all the overtime they want, long breaks and a carte blanche to go in and out of the plant on “union business”—while they stay in the union office and still get paid.

There are only 400 workers left at GM Transmission. When I hired in during the 1980s there were 2,700 and thousands more at the GM Trim plant. Next June, around the time that GM is celebrating its 90th anniversary in the city, there will be no more GM plants in Windsor.

Tony Clement, a Conservative in Parliament, said, “30 years in the factory doesn’t mean you deserve a pension.” This comes from a politician who gets an \$80,000 pension, plus cost of living increases, after six years in the government.

Gene: There were 52,000 GM workers in Canada back then. When we close, there will only be 7,000 left. The CAW slogan is “Fighting Back Makes a Difference.” If this is fighting back then we might as well surrender.

There is nothing left in Windsor. I read in the paper that there are 9,000 families on welfare in the city and 20,000 on unemployment. What happens when unemployment runs out?

The companies love high unemployment and surplus labor—they can cut wages and push the workers even harder. If they were to announce there were 100 openings at the plant, 10,000 people would show up to apply.

The rich executives at GM who drove the mightiest industrial corporation in the world into the ground are walking around like kings.

Every gain workers originally won was through the union. Now people feel the union is useless. We need to be more like the workers in South Korea. In their last strike they were burning barricades and fighting to defend their jobs. The whole world market is now accessible to these auto companies, and they won't be happy until they have slavery.

WSWS: Could you describe what happened when you went to the plant on October 15?

Gene: I was passing out a flyer with your article and the CAW reps who got the unethical wage raise to fatten up their pensions came out of the plant and started screaming at me, just inches from my nose. They were trying to get me in a fight so I would be charged with assault. One of them—Todd Smith—punches me in the gut and tries to knock the leaflets from my hands. He calls me a 'loser.' I told them they were losers because they lost \$6,000 from GM.

They feel they have the power and they want no one to question it. They try to create a climate of fear.

The auto bosses used to have company goons to intimidate and beat up workers like at the Battle of the Overpass at Ford Rouge. Now there are union company goons. Management has gotten rid of the intermediaries. They're like the Kapos in a prison camp; management relies on them to put out the fires if things get volatile with the workers.

You have no democratic rights in the CAW. Its constitution is about as democratic as the one in the old USSR. They attempted to charge me with "behavior unbecoming of a union member" four times. There is democracy in the CAW as long as you are saying what they want you to say.

When you expose them, they say you are "anti-union." Meanwhile they are the biggest scabs there ever were.

It's the same thing in the US with the UAW. Now they have this VEBA retiree trust fund, which will give company shares to the top guys in the UAW.

John: People have no use for the CAW. When they split off from the UAW they said it would be a better union. It wouldn't be like the old UAW. But we are in the same boat as the workers in the UAW.

Gene: Whether its Ken Lewenza or Buzz Hargrove [the current and former CAW president] all you have is nepotism and cronyism in the CAW.

They cheat to get elected just like [Afghan President] Hamid Karzai. They were caught at that at the GM plant in Oshawa. If you get elected for two terms as a union official in Oshawa you can become a millionaire. With a lot of overtime, a production worker might make CAN\$80,000 a year. A shop committeeman in the Oshawa plant is guaranteed seven twelve-hour days and can make \$250,000 a year. The company lines their pockets with money because it knows they will care of GM's interests.

John: I asked a manager in the plant, "What did they [CAW Local 1973 officials] sell me out for? What are they getting?" He got very upset.

The ex-CAW chairman of the Lear plant, which was closed, has gotten a job working for the company in one of the southern US states.

Gene: If you question them, they will physically intimidate you and run to a manager to try to throw you out. At the next union meeting we plan to demand their resignations.

John: The company has had them on the payroll so long that managers went around the plant collecting up the leaflets exposing the CAW officials.

Gene: Why would GM have a problem with someone knocking the union? They do it because they are brothers. I'm retired now. If I hadn't I would have been fired by now for speaking out.

The WSWS calls on all workers to condemn the cowardly attack on Locknick and defend these workers from further victimization by the CAW and management.

This experience underscores the necessity for auto workers to break with this pro-company organization and build rank-and-file committees, independently of the CAW, to conduct a struggle to unite GM, Ford and Chrysler workers—in Canada and the US—to overturn the concessions imposed by the CAW and UAW.

As we noted in our previous article, "The dissident Local 1973 members were entirely justified in exposing and denouncing the sweetheart deal between the local CAW leadership and GM.

"But what must be challenged and overturned is not just the payoff that some local union officials received for helping GM impose unprecedented concessions on the rank-and-file, but the anti-worker auto industry 'bailout' as a whole and the associated job cuts, including the impending closure of the Windsor transmission plant.

"To develop such a struggle, auto workers need to soberly examine the evolution of the CAW and UAW and repudiate their pro-capitalist and nationalist perspective. If these organizations have failed the working class and been transformed into adjuncts of management, it is because they uphold capitalism, and enforce the subordination of workers' needs to the profits of big business, and have systematically divided Canadian and US workers, thereby enabling the automakers to pit workers against worker in a fratricidal struggle of jobs to the lowest bidder.

"The *World Socialist Web Site* invites discussion of these vital issues with Windsor transmission plant workers and auto workers throughout North America."



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