Indianapolis GM workers pressured to vote on wage cut

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In an effort to circumvent the overwhelming vote by Indianapolis GM stamping plant workers against his demand for a 50 percent wage cut, JD Norman, the prospective buyer of the plant, is stepping up pressure on workers to sign a petition calling for a revote.

Norman called a meeting of auto workers Sunday to discuss the details of his proposal, which would cut the pay of production workers from $29 an hour to $15.50. About 50 workers, together with their families, came to the meeting, out of 660 workers currently employed at the plant.

Norman's presentation followed a union meeting last month where workers drove UAW international representatives from their local union meeting, after the UAW violated an earlier vote, passed 384-22, barring any negotiations with the corporate raider. The UAW has presented Norman as the savior of workers who would keep open the plant, which GM has scheduled to close next year as part of its bankruptcy restructuring.

Workers have been under pressure from Norman, GM, and UAW officials to sign a petition to vote on the contract. UAW officials made clear that any future vote would be by secret ballot, repeating the lie that a "silent majority" of auto workers supports the wage-cutting plan but is intimidated by a "vocal minority."

Workers said that several people were walking around the plant with the petition forms, including a former committeeman and the local's sourcing representative, Glenn Sheeks, the "resident scab," as one worker referred to him.

Although corporate policy states that supervisors must remain neutral in contract disputes, workers said that supervisors had put pressure on workers to sign the petition.

One supervisor recently shut down his line to allow the petition to circulate, and watched over workers to see if they were signing it, according to a worker at the plant.

In response to constant pressure for a revote, workers have taken to wearing buttons reading, "No means No" or "I said 'No'" inside the factory.

Meanwhile workers defended the stand they took against the wage cut. "Everyone else in the country should get ready, because this will happen to you. The federal minimum wage will be going down after this," warned one worker at the plant.

One temporary worker was told by supporters of the contract that the goal of gathering signatures of 51 percent of the workers had already been reached, and that the signatures had been sent to UAW Region 3 Director Maurice Davison, who has been pushing for the wage cut. Asked by workers at the plant whether this was true, Jim Zent, the servicing director of Region 3 said, "not nearly enough signatures" had been collected.

Another worker said that he was told that the petitioners had received over 400 signatures, which he regarded as preposterous. "How many of these signatures are salaried or falsified names, multiple signatures or family members?" he asked.

Supporters of the petition have turned to various fraudulent means of getting signatures. Another worker at the plant said she knew a die maker who was approached by a temporary worker circulating a petition. When the die maker said he did not want to sign, the petition gatherer said, "You can just scratch something on there, it doesn't matter if they can read it."

Even though the workers believe only a small minority supports the sale of the plant, they have had

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enough experience with the UAW to know it can conjure a majority whenever it wants to. “We’re watching the bulletin boards all the time to see if another meeting is called,” said one worker.

The majority of people signing the petition, like the majority of those who came to Norman’s meeting on Sunday, were either temporary workers—who are already paid the low wage and who hope they will be transferred to full-time—or workers nearing retirement who would get a GM pension in addition to wages and a $35,000 bonus from the new owner.

“Taking a wage cut or seeing the plant close, those are really bad alternatives,” said one temporary worker who said he supported Norman’s proposal. “But there is nothing out there, and that is why some temporary workers will vote for it. They are all saying that the $28 an hour wage—a middle-class wage—is pretty much gone forever. You take $15 an hour or GM will liquidate the plant.”

Norman and the UAW have sought to exploit the high levels of unemployment in Indianapolis and throughout the state to ram through the wage cut. As he told the media after Sunday’s meeting, “This is a unique time for manufacturing” and a “great opportunity.” Even so, he has by all indications won only a small number of workers.

Meanwhile, GM is using the threat of the plant closing as a hammer to cut wages. “They are starting to close the plant and are using this as a scare tactic,” said one young worker. When a parts plant is slated to close, production is usually ramped up to compensate for the delay in moving the machinery, guaranteeing uninterrupted supply. This is what seems to be happening now. “They’re running lines way too fast, and machinery keeps breaking. They brought in contract repairmen to keep the lines functional,” said another worker at the plant.

The plant’s holding company, Motors Liquidation Company, otherwise known as the “old GM,” presented a plan for its Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing, which includes the sale of its Wilmington, Delaware facility to Fisker Automotive Inc. and plans to sell a Pontiac plant to a film studio.

A worker told the *WSWS* that many of her coworkers had put in transfer requests, and that the workforce would be drawn down by 60 workers per month. “They’ll draw down the older workforce, and probably replace them with temps. Then they’ll keep pressing for a revote until they get it through,” she said. “They’ll keep working on us.”

The campaign for a revote makes it all the more imperative that workers organize a fight, independently of and in opposition to the sabotage of the UAW, against the wage cut. In opposition to attempts to divide different sections of workers against each other, workers must champion the interests of the next generation of auto workers by fighting to prevent the shutdown of the factory and to overturn the two-tier wage system agreed to by the UAW.

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