

“In the mid-1980s my parents said the UAW was not for us”

## Interview with Ohio auto parts worker

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with an auto parts worker from northern Ohio about conditions confronting workers, the role of United Auto Workers union, the Obama administration and the political issues confronting the working class.

Ronnie J., 43, is a machinist at a small plant that produces brake parts for a major multinational firm. Like the Detroit automakers, the big suppliers have seen a spike in profits and share values after Wall Street restructured the industry, destroying the jobs, wages and pensions of tens of thousands of parts workers. In this attack, the corporations enjoyed the full backing of the UAW.

The son of former GM workers, Ronnie is raising a family with far lower wages in real terms than his parents earned 35 years ago. He began by commenting on the struggle of the workers at GM’s Indianapolis stamping plant who rebelled against demands by the company and the UAW that they accept a 50 percent wage cut.

“You look what happened in Indianapolis. The UAW is hooked in with the corporations. It is sad to say, but it was the union that tried to beat the workers into taking a pay cut. In the mid-1980s my folks, who both worked at the GM foundry plant in Defiance, Ohio, said ‘this union is not for us; they are for themselves and they are giving the companies a carte blanche.’ Now the union is strong-arming the members.

“There are workers who have spent their whole lives living on what they earned. Then all of a sudden they say you’re going to work for \$14 an hour instead of \$28. In 2007, we were forced to take a \$2 an hour wage cut at our plant and it took a lot of adjusting. Can you imagine losing half your wage instead? Things are going backward.

“My mom and dad attained a certain level by working at GM. We weren’t affluent but I never was in want for basic needs. I know now that I won’t do as well as my parents and that my kids are facing an even tougher future

than me.”

Ronnie spoke about the wages in his own factory where 110 out of 160 workers have lost their jobs over the last five years. “In 2007, I got a 20 cent raise after being there 15 years. Before that I had not gotten a raise since 2002. I make \$13.92 an hour. In 1976 when my mother hired in to GM she was getting \$6.00 an hour, or over \$22 an hour in today’s money. That means I’m making less than two-thirds of what she did 35 years ago.

“I come from a small town in Ohio. There is no industry coming in. Since 1995 we have lost three or four companies; they’re just gone. My older son is in the army and has already been sent to Afghanistan. My younger one wants to go to college and be a teacher. But all you have to do is look at the news and you see that they are getting rid of teachers left and right. What are people supposed to do?

“When my son came home on leave he got together with his friends. You see all of them in the military—they are blue-collar kids, working class youth from poor backgrounds who don’t have a pot to piss in.”

Discussing the role of the UAW, Ronnie said, “When I was a kid I would hear my parents come home and say the workers are talking about a wildcat strike. It was the union that said no. The UAW suppressed the only weapon the workers had. The union said it would not pay strike benefits and it wouldn’t defend anyone who was victimized.”

Over the last three decades, the UAW abandoned any defense of workers’ jobs and living standards and was transformed into a direct tool of management. In exchange for its collaboration with the Obama administration and the auto bosses in the restructuring of GM and Chrysler, the UAW was given a substantial ownership stake in the auto companies.

“The UAW is holding onto billions of dollars. If it was a true union and was out to protect its people they wouldn’t care about private investment funds or pushing

up profits so their shares will go up in value. The corporations are in business—it's their job to make a profit, not the union. The unions should be for the interests of the people on the line and holding on to what they have; not giving everything away to the companies.

"Now the UAW has taken over retiree health care benefits. What a terrible idea. If anything goes wrong and it runs out of money the company won't take any of the blame. It will be the UAW that cuts the benefits. That's what the companies wanted."

Ronnie said, he voted for Obama in 2008, hoping that the Democratic president and Democratic-controlled Congress would end the war and put an end to policies, championed by the Republicans, which benefited the rich at the expense of working people.

"Obama made so many campaign promises—about getting out of Iraq, closing Guantanamo, 'hope and change'—but out of the gate he did none of these things. Instead he gave a multi-trillion-dollar bailout to Wall Street. That money could have been used to keep people in their homes. That would have done a lot more to help the economy. Instead people are being foreclosed and thrown into the streets; that is making me quite irate."

Recalling one of his first political experiences, he said, "I was born in 1967 so I was 14 when Reagan fired the air traffic controllers and broke their union, PATCO. I was only a teenager but I could see what was going down. I knew it wasn't good for the workers and it was going to open the door for anti-union efforts.

"I didn't go for all this stuff about Reagan being a great president and I never fell for this 'trickle down' economics. The only ones who benefited were the rich. Obama said he didn't want to keep tax breaks for those making over \$200,000 a year, but the Republicans did. Now Obama is going to cave in on extending Bush's tax cuts to the rich. He's so conciliatory to a party that does not have our best interests in mind—or even his own. Why extend a hand of cooperation to the Republicans?

"We have a two-party system. Workers who voted for Obama in '08 went back in 2010 and voted in the clowns that they threw out the last time. As a member of the working class you know that you're pissed but you just don't know who to be pissed at. That's deliberate. It's like a mushroom—we're just sitting in the dark and in the crap."

Expressing his opposition to the ongoing wars in Central Asia and the Middle East, he said, "The Iraq war was about oil. The 'weapons of mass destruction' story was just a story. With the war the US said we're going to

have permanent access to the oil as opposed to facing a chance that the tap will be cut off like it was in the 1970s. China and India are industrializing too and they need resources also.

"The US spends more on defense than the next 15 countries combined. The business of America is war. It's not Walmart—it's War-Mart. There is nothing out there for the young generation and the best employment opportunity they can find is the US government and Uncle Sam."

Ronnie commented on the various means—used by the politicians, the corporations and the unions—to block a unified struggle by the working class against the profit system, including the glorification of capitalism.

"In America they try to claim that everyone can be rich. People spend their whole lives spinning their wheels waiting to catch a break and become rich."

On the efforts to scapegoat immigrants, he said, "From a human perspective I can understand why people cross the border. All they want is a better life. If the situation was changed and Mexico was a superpower and we lived in a poor country, people would be crossing the border to go south. The history of the US is that the newest batch of immigrants—whether they were Irish, Chinese or Mexicans—try to make it and they are the latest bad guys to blame all our troubles on. It's just like racism—we are too busy fighting against ourselves so the rich can get away with anything.

"The working class in the US needs a worldview. If we can develop our own party we can go to Mexico and help the workers improve their own lives—our long-term goal has to be bringing the living standards of everybody up. Instead all you hear is that our wages have to be driven down. But why not up? If you don't want your job exported to a place where workers are getting \$2 an hour, what about bringing the wages of our brothers and sisters up so we can keep jobs here and they can have decent paying jobs too?"



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