

UAW plan for autoworkers: Back to sweatshop conditions

Jerry White
14 September 2011

With four-year labor agreements covering 112,000 auto workers expiring today, the United Auto Workers is preparing to accept a deal that will replace regular hourly wage increases with a scheme that ties pay to productivity, so-called quality improvement and the profits of the corporations.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, GM and the UAW remain in talks over a pay-for-performance system. UAW President Bob King “has agreed to the idea in principle, but the two sides have yet to work out the details, particularly over how compensation will be tied to vehicle quality.”

King has repeatedly said the UAW does not want an agreement that increases the companies’ “fixed” labor costs, saying this would undermine their competitiveness. Workers have not seen a wage increase since 2003. An ever-larger portion of workers are saddled with “tier two” wages of \$14 an hour or less, making it virtually impossible to buy the cars they produce.

Though presented as a modern innovation, the proposed pay scheme is designed to drive up productivity and exploitation in the same fashion as the hated piecework system that dominated the industry before auto workers established the UAW through the mass industrial struggles of the 1930s. In this case, however, the role of enforcer will be taken up by UAW officials.

The conditions in the factories have already been thrown back decades. At GM’s giant Lordstown, Ohio plant—where 4,100 workers labor in stamping, assembly and other operations—475 Chevy Cruze models are produced on a shift, or one every minute. In addition to the thousands of workers in their 40s and 50s, there are hundreds of temporary workers and contractors in their 20s and 30s making sub-standard pay and benefits.

Under the terms dictated by the Obama administration’s Auto Task Force in 2009 and accepted by the UAW, relief time has been reduced to 40 minutes per eight-hour shift—two ten minute breaks and a 20 minute lunch break. Previously, a worker could take a half hour for lunch and had two 15-minute breaks. Workers are also no longer paid for overtime when they work beyond an eight-hour day.

“It is a big physical strain, the body is not made to do that,” a former GM worker whose husband transferred to the plant after his plant closed, told the WSWS. “In GM, workers have bad

knees, bad backs, and feet problems. You are constantly on your feet with no relief. It is not hard work per se, but grueling, and it is repetitive and goes on every day. By the time I was done each day I could hardly walk up a set of stairs.”

She continued, “You are constantly expected to catch defective parts before they come down the conveyor and get in your hands. In my previous plant, I handled big parts—metal tailgates—and they were coming down the line fast. We had a batch that had a small split in some of them and the supervisor said, ‘How come you’re not catching them?’ Well, we had to handle these tailgates without cutting ourselves, get them into a rack, and then spin them around to catch the next part.

“It’s ridiculous, I said, the line is moving too fast and you are supposed to catch the parts before they get to you. Once you get past one obstacle and set a pace doing what you have to do, they add something else for you to do. They expect workers to do too much: your eyes have to be scanning, your hands grabbing and your feet moving—all at the same time.”

Under the pay-for-performance scheme, the livelihoods of workers will depend on how fast they, or their team, can move. This shifts the onus for pushing up the line speed onto the workers themselves and creates the conditions for more injuries, as workers are forced to meet new and higher quotas.

In this regard it is worth recalling the conditions auto workers faced in the 1920s and 1930s. An account of the piecework system that sounds very similar to what is now being proposed is given in the book, *American Automobile Workers 1900-1933* by Joyce Shaw Peterson.

“For American industrialists, piecework was a device to extract as high a production rate as possible from the workers without undue cost to the company. It also made workers pay for downtime caused by machinery breakdown, since they could not produce during those times.”

The industry hired “time study men,” Peterson writes, to set pay rates when a new production process was introduced. It was common for management to find some excuse to change the rates—under the guise of some change in productive technique—once workers had worked themselves up to a fairly high standard of pay. In many cases, these workers were moved elsewhere, while new workers were expected to meet the new higher levels of production at the lower pay scale.

Individual piecework was not cost-effective because it involved complicated efforts to count each worker's production, and workers learned to collectively set a standard pace of production. It was also incompatible with the increasing use of the moving assembly line.

"Responding to these disadvantages," Peterson writes, "many companies switched to a group piecework, or 'bonus' system, where a group of workers or a whole department were paid according to the production of the entire group rather than that of the individual worker."

This system produced several advantages for the company. Incentive plans offered the benefit of being too complex and difficult for workers to interpret. Rates could be set in such a way that each increment of production produced a smaller and smaller increment in pay, in effect cutting the rate without having to announce it as such. Most importantly, Peterson writes, "group piecework made the men take over the foreman's call to 'hurry up,' exerting pressure on the slower men to keep up so as not to lessen the group's wages."

One pieceworker, Tracy Doll, from Hudson Motors, recalled: "If one man slowed down, he was slowing down the livelihood of all the people. So the other guys went over and jumped onto him and said 'hurry up, get moving.' This was the idea. Now they got the men stretched out to where they could not stretch any longer and we have got the fast men carrying the slow men and all of them getting wages based on a percentage of their day rates."

Peterson notes that there were instances of workers fighting outside the plant, with faster workers beating up slower ones to persuade them to work faster and keep pay rates high. Moreover, the foremen were motivated to push the men hard, since their pay was based on the departments' output.

Returning to 2011, and replacing foremen with the UAW "productivity and quality control" officers, the picture comes into focus. As UAW President Bob King told an industry conference last month, "We've got to be smart and creative to find ways to increase income without creating a competitive disadvantage."

This is a formula for a return to crushing speedup and a rash of injuries as workers compete to meet ever-higher quotas.

"With the pressure to increase production there will be a lot of people hurt," the Ohio worker said. "They will be grabbing for pieces without knowing that there is a hole in their glove and slashing their fingers to the bone. It's easy to do. If you get hurt on the job, they'll blame you for it and you could be fired. What are you supposed to do, go to your next job without a couple of fingers?"

"If you make your production goal you get free pizza for lunch. Under the new system, your pay will depend on how fast you produce. How can upper management and the people in the UAW offices impose what should be done on the line when they've never experienced it? If it looks good on paper, they say it can be done. Well I say, send your son, no better yet,

your wife and your daughter, down here. If they can do it, we will.

"If the UAW does the evaluation, for the first couple of months they might pay you a bonus to make it look good. Then they will find reasons not to pay for extra performance while keeping the speed at the new higher quota."

Asked how the UAW and the company could determine who got paid for "quality improvement," she said, "If bad parts are shipped out, they will find a way to cut your pay. Every part has a number and a tag that says what day and what shift it was produced on. I figure if a team does not reduce defects, they are not going to get paid any bonus. But if you are pushed to move as fast as possible, of course there is going to be bad stuff produced."

In the 1930s these brutal conditions led to a rebellion against the pro-company AFL unions. The driving force behind the wave of sit-down strikes in the auto industry 75 years ago was, as American Trotskyist James P. Cannon wrote, "the bitter and irreconcilable grievances of the workers; their protest against mistreatment, speedup, insecurity; the revolt of the pariahs against their pariah status."

In its collaboration with the corporations and the hostility to the working class, the UAW is far worse than the old AFL. A new rebellion of auto workers, this time against the UAW, and the revival of the great socialist traditions that guided an earlier generation of auto workers is on the order of the day.

The World Socialist Web Site is encouraging autoworkers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the UAW, to spearhead an industrial and political struggle to defend jobs, abolish the two-tier wage system and restore all concessions, including cost of living and pay increases. (See our statement: "A Call to Action")



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact