

Widespread opposition and abstentions in UAW-GM contract vote

Jerry White

26 September 2011

While a few local unions have reported passage of the new four-year labor agreement between General Motors and the United Auto Workers, large numbers of GM workers are voting "no" or abstaining from the vote altogether out of disgust with the UAW.

After decades of betrayals, there is a widespread suspicion the UAW could rig the vote. Moreover even if it were rejected, workers know the UAW would do nothing to fight for any improvements.

At several ratification meetings, UAW International and local officials were met with angry responses when they tried to justify the sellout by saying it was the best they could do in the present economic circumstances. In fact, GM has recorded nearly \$6 billion in profits this year.

UAW officials also tried to browbeat workers by saying that if the tentative agreement was rejected, an even worse deal would be imposed by a government-appointed arbitrator. In 2009, as part of the Obama administration's restructuring of the auto industry, the UAW accepted the binding arbitration clause and a ban on strikes at GM and Chrysler until 2015.

There is bitter criticism of the contract and the UAW on blogs and Facebook pages hosted by GM workers. One typical comment read, "No COLA (Cost of Living Allowance), no Easter Monday, no overtime after 8hrs, and didn't even try to get moved workers home when work opened up and you have the nerve to try and shove this crap down our throats. I'm done, steal somebody else's money."

In Lansing, Michigan workers at the Delta Township assembly plant overwhelmingly defeated the contract, with 66 percent of the production workers voting down the deal and 57 percent of skilled tradesmen also voting no. A large number of workers at the plant—which employs 4,000 hourly workers—make two-tier wages or have been forced to uproot their families and move from Tennessee and other states after factory closures or layoffs.

In the hard-hit industrial town of Flint, only a few hundred

workers out the 2,513 at the truck assembly plant voted on the deal. UAW officials would not give a breakdown of the balloting. There were also low turnouts in Lordstown, Ohio, where the agreement passed by 54 to 46 percent at the stamping plant, according to an unofficial tally.

In Indianapolis, the contract was defeated by the small number of workers who remain in the stamping plant, which is slated for closure. Last year workers rejected demands by the UAW for a 50 percent wage cut in order to entice a new buyer for the plant.

In Spring Hill, Tennessee, UAW officials reported the deal passed by an 82 percent margin with no further details. Under the contract, the factory that was closed by Obama's Auto Task Force will be reopened on the basis of the expanded use of low wage, tier two workers.

In Lansing, Michigan production workers at the Grand River plant voted by a margin of 57 to 43 percent in favor of the deal. UAW officials used the promised addition of a new shift at the Cadillac assembly plant to push the deal.

"All the UAW officials tell you is you're lucky to have a job," Jeff, a worker from the Delta Township plant told the WSWs when he came to vote on Saturday. "It's just like management."

"The other day at work I said to the guys, 'We should form a union because we're facing what auto workers were in the 1930s.' This time we have to form a union to stop the union.

"Soon we are going to be having everybody working for low wages for this or that contractor in the plant. This one will be in the plant working for 'Acme Co.', that one for 'Smith Co.' It's all about greed and paying off the big stockholders. This is free enterprise and capitalism, they say, but it's all about stomping on our necks to make a buck."

As for UAW promises of secure jobs in exchange for wage concessions, Jeff said, "Every piece of equipment in the Delta Township is 'plug and play.' They could put all the robots on pallets and pull out of there anytime. They even boast that it is a 'green' plant, meaning the land is not

contaminated, and they could sell the property to a warehouse company or Wal-Mart.”

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party in Flint, Detroit, Lansing and Lordstown, Ohio distributed a statement calling for a rejection of the deal and the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the UAW, to fight against the two-tier system and all wage and benefit concessions. SEP supporters discussed the need for the industrial and political mobilization of the working class in opposition to the Obama administration, on the basis of an international and socialist program. (See, "Reject UAW sellout! Establish rank-and-file committees to prepare strike action!")

Many workers at the Delta Township factory are “GM gypsies” who were transferred after their plants closed or they were laid off. Some make the nine-hour trip from Michigan to Tennessee dozens of times a year to see family they left behind.

A worker from the Spring Hill, Tennessee plant—closed in 2009—said, “They said they are going to reopen the plant if this contract passes. I heard they are going to get 60 percent tier two workers there, and soon enough it is going to be unlimited tier two.

“If you look at all the factories in the South, you see a lot of temporary workers who can be hired and fired at anytime. That’s what they want to do here. The two-tier system was a bad deal. The UAW is saying it’s ‘more jobs,’ well they’re getting the money. The UAW is nothing but a business.”

Another worker who transferred from Tennessee said, “They told us ‘go to Kansas City or Toledo or Lansing or you’re done.’ They want nothing but two-tier and temps in Spring Hill, like they have in the other plants in Mississippi. They’re trying to make the US a third world country. If you look at history we’re just another civilization that has declined.

“They want to give us a \$5,000 signing bonuses over four years. I had a house in Tennessee that I’m losing money on. I had to rent an apartment here. All the UAW is doing is looking out for themselves, not the workers.”

Food stamps

One worker who is middle aged but a temporary employee was hired into the plant in 2006. She has remained a temporary worker for five years and is only making a little more than \$16.00 an hour. “My friend has two children at GM making the same wage. She told me, ‘Yeah great, but I still qualify for food stamps.’ All of us have faced layoffs

and callbacks, so it is very hard. Imagine that: she is doing the same work as workers making \$28 an hour and qualifies for food stamps. That’s what things have come to in this country.”

Another tier two worker said, “I was hired in 2007 at the full wage and I worked for more than one-year. We got laid off in January 2008 and were brought back at the end of June. Instead of being brought back at the regular wage—like we were told—we came back at the lower wage. When we asked about that, we were told, ‘Sorry, this is the way it is going to be.’”

She explained what it was like trying to live on the lower wage. “I lost a lot of stuff—the truck and the house, and I’m in debt. The bank wouldn’t work with us about our truck payment. We ended up losing that because we couldn’t afford \$400 a month any more. I lost my trailer. I had to move back in with my parents. I couldn’t afford daycare for my daughter, and she had to go to a friend’s house instead of being in a learning center.

“My daughter is on state aid because I cannot afford to put her on my insurance policy through work. It would take too much out of my check. The two-tiers pay more for less coverage. We don’t have prescription plans or anything like that. They give us a Visa debit card with \$300 a year, and that’s what we pay our prescriptions and co-pays with. After that is gone, we pay out of pocket. After you reach a certain amount they will reimburse you, but if you don’t spend \$1,800 out of your pocket, they won’t reimburse you.

“GM is not in bankruptcy any more. They are making billions of dollars. The CEOs get bonuses that are bigger than my entire salary for a year. That’s not right. They shouldn’t be cutting the workers. They have got everything backwards. They are being greedy like everyone else. Money might make the world go round, but if you don’t have anyone to build your product you are not going to make anything.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact