"People are tired of this … they're getting to the breaking point"

Chicago auto workers denounce UAW-Ford deal

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At the Ford assembly plant in south Chicago, workers expressed disgust with the contract signed by the United Auto Workers. In particular, they denounced the pay freeze for long-time workers—who have not had a raise in eight years—and expansion of the two-tier wage system that is condemning young workers to a life of insecurity and poverty.

The factory, which currently employs 2,700 hourly workers, produces the Lincoln MKS, Ford Taurus and Ford Explorer models on two shifts. With the UAW clearing the way for the hiring of hundreds of more low-wage workers, Ford has announced it will add a third shift and another 1,100 workers.

Nationally, the new contract sanctions the addition of 5,750 new "entry-level jobs," which presently pay between $14 and $15 an hour—half the wages of workers hired before 2007. According to analysts, this will help Ford limit increases in labor costs to a smaller margin than General Motors achieved in its contract with the UAW. Wall Street hailed that deal for providing the slimmest increase in four decades.

The Chicago plant employs about 750 workers, many in their late teens and early 20s, who are stuck in the category of so-called Long-Term Supplemental (LTS) employees. These workers not only receive the lower wage rate, they also have no job security and have less paid time off. They can be hired and fired at will over a span of several years without accruing seniority or a higher wage. When they complain about their pariah status, UAW officials invariably tell them they are lucky to have a job.

"It's slavery. We don't have any say in the plant," a young worker named Frederick said. Another 18-year-old worker said, "For the workers here, it's like a dictatorship. I voted to strike, but the union has done nothing. They're just going to keep accepting concessions from the company."

Nationwide, Ford employs 2,250 temporary workers and another 100 permanent tier-two workers. These numbers will be greatly increased under the new contract, which UAW President Bob King boasts has convinced Ford to relocate jobs from Mexico and China back to the US. By offering up its members as cheap labor, the UAW is ensuring it will collect millions more in dues income annually and boost the value of the Ford shares controlled by the UAW executives.

In 2009, rank-and-file workers overturned the UAW-Ford contract negotiated by King, which would have stripped them of the right to strike and lifted all caps on the percentage of tier-two workers. Responding to the threat that workers would reject the new sellout, King tried to use the threat of mass layoffs to blackmail Ford's 40,600 workers to support the deal, saying, "In this economic climate, people ought to realize that things are extremely unstable, and to wait would not be smart in terms of our membership."

"There is lots of opposition to this contract," one worker told the WSWS. "It's like a cycle, people are being forced to stand up again. People are tired of this. They're getting to the breaking point."

Workers are livid over the fact that they have lost between $7,000 and $30,000 in wages and benefits over the last five years, while Ford is making record profits and paying its CEO Alan Mulally tens of millions of dollars.

Kisha, a worker with 11 years, said, "Nothing came back to us in this contract. We haven't had a raise in

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years. That means we have to subtract from our budgets at home and downsize.

"Ford benefits from this contract, not us. And Bob King and the UAW are going to get more dues money, that's for sure. It's a slap in the face. Ford is paying its chairman $4 million a month. God forbid we should earn a decent standard of living on our $25 an hour wage. It's shameful."

Danny, a worker with 18 years, referred to the practice in the 1970s when a worker was hired in at 90 percent of full pay and after three months gained job security and full wages. "There is no end date for these temporary workers," he said. "They are living day to day and don't know if they will have a job or not. They can never reach full pay of $19 for a tier-two worker.

"In the last round of layoffs in 2008 we went down to one shift here. Now they are talking about adding a third shift. That will be a killer for Ford—it'll be pure profit—because it is going to be manned by temps and workers who can never see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Commenting on the situation facing workers in the US and around the world, he said, "We have a two-class system here. In the past, at least they threw you some peanuts and said you were in the 'middle class.' Now every worker is being hit. Look how the teachers are getting stuck. They keep talking about how important education is and then they screw the people who are providing it. All the politicians, whether they are Democrats or Republicans, are puppets of the rich."

One 33-year-old auto worker, who didn't want to be named, said: "All this talk about our getting our holiday pay back, time off, the UAW has done nothing for us. The foremen here get big bonuses, though. I think we could be contracts away from having this plant closed. The work conditions here aren't great either. We have had plumbing and sewage failures."

Mike, a worker with 17 years, said, "Who can live on $17 an hour and provide a good, quality life for a family? Mulally is making $90 million—that's more than all the CEOs combined at Toyota, Nissan and the other companies. As for the UAW, they just want to add more dues to the millions they are already getting."

Ford was also given a huge tax break by the city of Chicago to expand production, creating a further loss of revenue for the city, which is already cutting and privatizing services. Announcing the addition of the third shift, Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff, said, "This is a victory for Ford, a victory for workers and a victory for Chicago."

"There is no reason to expand the two-tier wages when the company is making billions," said Robert, another worker at the plant. "This is happening to the whole country—everybody is taking pay cuts. This is nothing but a sellout by the UAW."

"I've got four kids," said another tier-two worker. "Making $15 or $16 an hour and with more out-of-pocket medical expenses, how can I afford to take them to the doctor? Before I was laid off in 2008, we were making full pay at $24 an hour. When they hired us back, they dropped us to $15. Now they want to get rid of all the higher paying jobs and take away our benefits.

"They said they had to give Mulally millions to keep the 'best talent.' They said the same thing about the bankers who screwed up the whole country.

"People fought in the old days for a decent standard of living. Now the UAW is giving it all away."

The Socialist Equality Party is calling on workers to form rank-and-file committees, independently of and in opposition of the UAW, to defeat the contract and develop an industrial and political fight to overturn the two-tier wage system and restore all wage and benefit concessions. We urge workers to download and distribute our statement and contact the SEP.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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