

SEP candidate speaks with Detroit Chrysler workers

A WSWS reporting team
26 May 2012

Socialist Equality Party candidate for US president Jerry White campaigned the Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly Plant on the east side of Detroit Thursday.

The plant currently employs 2,890 workers producing the Jeep Grand Cherokee and Dodge Durango SUVs. At the beginning of the year, Chrysler announced it would add a third shift and hire 1,100 new workers at the plant, all of whom will make the lower-tier pay scale of \$16 an hour, instead of the \$28 an hour currently paid to higher seniority workers.

Workers are on overtime, including working two out of every three Saturdays, and the plant will not observe its traditional two-week summer shutdown because of high demand for the profitable vehicles.

SEP campaigners distributed White's statement, "Obama, the UAW and the auto bailout" to workers and discussed the workers' experiences in the course of the forced bankruptcy and restructuring of Chrysler and General Motors in April and June 2009.

The United Auto Workers union has endorsed Obama and hailed him as the savior of the auto workers, seeking to contrast his approach to the restructuring of the auto industry and that of his Republican opponent Mitt Romney, longtime head of Bain Capital. But as a *Washington Post* columnist noted this week, "Barack Obama is the real private equity king in this race, not Mitt Romney," because in the auto bailout, "Obama fired management, shed workers, slashed costs, revamped operations, restructured the balance sheet and fashioned new strategies."

White explained that Obama and Romney approach the working class from the identical class standpoint, defending the interests of the banks, hedge funds and billionaires. He found considerable agreement among workers whose experience tells them that the union is

nothing more than an arm of corporate management.

One worker told White, "I was making \$28 an hour as a part-time employee. When they put me on full time they cut my wages to \$16 an hour. And you know what? They tell me I should be happy just to have a job. It's the UAW saying that. In the plant we all talk about the UAW just being bought off. Right now we're just getting by because my husband is still working as a carpenter. But if he's laid off we're going to have to depend on my wages."

A young worker was one of those who stopped to talk to White. He expressed skepticism about the entire political system, calling it a "bowl of spaghetti," in which the politicians, the corporate executives and the union officials were all "intertwined together." The politician, he said, "don't care about people in poverty" and, he added, "the UAW is in the pockets of the company."

Like many workers, he blames "politics" for the collusion of the government, corporations and unions. White explained that the "politics" the Socialist Equality Party was fighting for was fundamentally different: the independent political movement of the working class.

The issue, he said, was not simply winning votes but building a mass political party of the working class to carry out a revolutionary transformation of society. The working class itself, White said, had to take political power, take the control of industries and banks out of the hands of the corporate executives and bankers and put them under the control of the working class.

The worker, who had voted for Obama, maintained, "The president was different than Bush, he saved the auto industry and gave people the opportunity to work, even though it's at half the wages."

White explained that the bailout was carried out to

boost the profits of the Wall Street investors. With the full support of the United Auto Workers, President Obama slashed jobs and wages and had condemned an entire generation of young workers to poverty level wages, setting precedent for wage cutting throughout the whole economy. White contrasted the bailout of the auto industry, which was conditioned on huge cuts in workers' living standards, to the bailout of the banks, which was done with no strings attached.

The worker responded, "I was very upset with the Wall Street bailout. The government found billions to rescue the banks but the rest of us have been left out in the cold. The new people being hired at the plant are being paid half the wages. They work side-by-side with me and they work just as hard—but they are making half of what I make."

A third shift of workers, he said, was being added to the plant in November: "The rest of us are being put on 10 hour-days, six days a week. They are going to have three shifts based on cheap labor."

Pointing to the surge in Chrysler profits—the company reported net income of \$473 million in the first quarter, a 300 percent increase from the same period the year before—he concluded, "The company is making lots of profits and big bucks off of us."

Jesse, a young worker just recently hired in at the second-tier low wage, responded enthusiastically to the campaign. "There's just a small percentage running the world. Any person you put in office, Obama or Romney, is just going to be a puppet. Half the people don't vote because they know the whole system is rigged."

"Honestly," he said, "it's time for a revolution. Isn't the wealth gap in this country bigger than ever before? For workers, it's like a treadmill. We're treated like cattle, not humans, from birth to the time we die—just milked for money."

"I grew up in downriver Detroit. I saw the downfall of the steel mills and the auto plants. I was raised by my mom who was a teacher."

White explained that far from doing anything about the jobs crisis, the corporations and the Obama administration wanted to maintain high levels of unemployment to force workers to accept any pay they could get their hands on.

Asked about the lowering of wages, especially for young workers, Jesse said, "Sadly, I'm happy to be

getting \$16 a hour compared to the \$300 a week I was making before this job."

White explained that young auto workers were not making very much more, taking inflation into account, than auto workers did just after the union was established in the 1930s. "And every hour you're in the factory," he added, "you are producing hundreds of dollars in new value from your labor."

(In fact, a new second-tier worker has a gross annual income of \$33,280, less than the price tag on a moderately equipped Dodge Laredo or Jeep Cherokee).

Jesse responded, "We're really just slaves in here. But I don't want to be cheap labor. We have to have real money to live on and enough to retire on—not just survive from paycheck to paycheck."



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