

Detroit area auto workers speak on passage of Michigan right-to-work law

A WSWWS reporting team
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World Socialist Web Site reporting teams spoke to auto workers in the Detroit area on their reaction to the recent passage of right-to-work legislation by the administration of Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder.

SEP supporters distributed copies of the latest edition of the WSWWS Auto Workers Newsletter, which carried a lead article titled “The bankruptcy of the unions and Michigan’s right-to-work law.” While opposing the new law, the statement explained that the interests of the nominal opposition, led by the unions, were based not on the interests of workers, but on the defense of the union bureaucracy’s own privileges. For decades, the unions have collaborated with corporate management in imposing concession after concession, while overseeing the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Many workers reacted with disgust and anger to the passage of the legislation, which bans contracts requiring workers to pay union dues as a condition of employment. At the same time, there was a wide hostility to the United Auto Workers.

Faviola Cruz, a worker at the Chrysler Warren Truck assembly plant north of Detroit with 20 years in the auto plants, said, “They are taking away the rights of people without asking the people. A lot of people went to Lansing [Michigan’s state capital] and they still signed it. People fought and died for the rights we have. It will all be for nothing if we don’t stand up.”

She explained that she and many of her fellow Chrysler employees had lost confidence in the UAW

due to its repeated betrayals. “I have been here since September 10. I came over from the Mack II plant and I am on second shift. I am second shift and I have 20 years with Chrysler! A lot of my coworkers are here as well; one of them has 45 years. The UAW doesn’t do anything. They lied to our faces.”

Steve, a Warren Truck worker with 16 years, said that while he opposed the right-to-work bill, “With the UAW we have basically a company union. The company pays the salaries of the union officials right up through the local level. They are basically performing personnel duties. If they are paying their salaries they are going to do as they say.”

Jeff Gray, a Warren Truck worker who attended the demonstration against the right-to-work law on Tuesday in Lansing, stopped to speak to WSWWS campaigners. He said, “People don’t understand that union jobs and wages set the guidelines for all jobs. A lot of people are better off for what the unions have done, even if they’re not in unions. They don’t understand what this means. It’s going to hurt everybody.”

SEP supporters pointed out that the relatively small turnout at Tuesday’s demonstration in Lansing was a product of the unions’ inability and unwillingness to mobilize masses of workers. “You would have hoped to have seen all the plants shut down in opposition to this,” Jeff replied. He went on to add that he felt that the lack of a mass turnout reflected a degree of apathy on the part of workers.

The SEP explained that the unions did not want a large turnout, or a real struggle, because their interests have become so intertwined with those of management as to be indistinguishable. The inability of the UAW to

mount a serious challenge to the right-to-work bill raised the need to build new organizations of struggle.

Maria, a Warren Truck worker with 18 years in the auto plants, was interested in the fight of the SEP to build an alternative to the UAW.

“The UAW seems to be more with management. They will act like they are for you in front of you, and then later on it is a different story. They help push stuff that they shouldn’t.

“They put more work on my job. When I tell the union it can’t be done, they make it uncomfortable for you. It’s like they are losing everything the people fought so hard to get. It is just a shame. They don’t seem to get it.

“They are working us three Saturdays. They are taking away our holidays. They tell us we are going to get a bonus and they took that too. Chrysler says they are broke and they are making millions. They have planes, houses. What about my children? When I go to the doctor why should I have to pay so much?

“It is terrible the way the union is right now. The people before us fought hard for what we have and they are giving it away like it is cookies. They are chopping away at people who have retired. You are chopping away at their pensions and medical.

“They have the 3-2-120 shift coming in March,” she said about the new 10-hour work schedule being implemented at Chrysler factories. “They have given away the eight-hour day. There is no overtime. They just don’t want us to have the money. They tell us ‘be quiet, be quiet’.”

Harper, a worker with one year at Warren Truck, said he was angered by the two-tier wage agreed to by the UAW, where new-hires make only half the pay of senior workers. “It is horrible. It is stupid. I do the same thing and get paid half as much. They [the UAW] sell you out. I don’t see where they are helping. They care about themselves, not us.”

A team of SEP supporters also distributed copies of the Auto Worker Newsletter near the Ford Assembly plant in Wayne, Michigan, where more than two thousand workers are employed in the manufacture of the popular Focus model and the new hybrid, fuel-efficient C-Max. The SEP’s opposition to the right-to-work legislation and to the betrayals of the UAW

elicited a wide range of responses.

An older Ford worker expressed the anger and frustration that is common among those with higher seniority. “We are screwed,” he said. “I cannot wait until we fight back.” Referring to the period of the past thirty years in which the union has helped impose pay cuts, concessions in benefits and the destruction of jobs, he said with disgust, “We have been sitting on our hands.”

A young Ford worker who was called back to work five months ago after being on layoff for four years referred to the implicit threat in the right-to-work legislation of continuing, deeper cuts in pay. “They cannot keep cutting wages,” he said referring to the two-tier wage system imposed by the UAW. “I can’t live.”

“I have 35 years at General Motors,” said another auto worker. “Now I am in Toledo [Ohio], and I am still fighting to keep my job.” He had been displaced from nearby Ypsilanti because of a plant closure. “It pisses me off,” he said in reference to the role of the union. “We are getting hit from both sides.” In response to the SEP call for new organizations of struggle, he said, “That’s right. We need that. I’m going to read this.”



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