Autoworkers speak out from Bedford, Indiana

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The town of Bedford located in limestone-rich southern Indiana is home to 13,000 residents and a General Motors' Powertrain transmission foundry that employs nearly 700 autoworkers. According to GM, the plant "is one of the leading aluminum die casting facilities in the world," which produces transmission casings and converter housings for the company's six-speed transmissions.

While GM has posted second quarter earnings in 2015 that nearly double the pretax profit for the second quarter of 2014, workers at the GM facility live paycheck-to-paycheck. Meanwhile, the majority of Bedford residents live in poverty or near poverty.

In Lawrence County, where Bedford is located, census data from 2013 shows that the average person makes only $22,169 per year, with median household income at $42,627. Nearly fifty percent of people live in homes that were constructed before 1939, and the median home value is $98,200. The poverty rate for Bedford is 21.4 percent, with 34.5 percent of children living in poverty.

In other words, most of the town's residents cannot afford to buy the cars produced with the parts built by workers at Powertrain.

This is typical of hundreds of towns in the American "Rust Belt," where decades of corporate "deindustrialization" have decimated the living standards of the working class. The corporations were able enforce this socially devastating policy with the help of trade unions like the United Auto Workers. (*See* "A portrait of life in America's Rust Belt")

A *WSWS* campaign team recently distributed the *Autoworker Newsletter* at the Bedford Powertrain plant and was greeted warmly by workers at the factory gates.

The *WSWS* subsequently received the following message: *Hi, I'm a UAW autoworker down in Bedford, Indiana at the GM Powertrain plant. It was recently that someone was handing out newsletters at the plant. I just wanted to inform you that you really opened a lot of peoples' eyes. Everyone I've spoken to about it says the same things and agrees with a lot of what you guys are saying.* The *WSWS* spoke with two autoworkers at the Bedford plant who commented sharply on the impact of the UAW-corporate alliance and its impact on conditions in the plant.

Alex said, "I've seen the union-management relationship first hand in two plants—I used to work at Wentzville before coming to Bedford. The union and the company are hugging, we get a lot of high fives, and we see them out to dinner together. It's right in our face.

"Management is in control here because the union just says they can do whatever they want. The UAW says 'they can do that.' I even had a shirt made that says 'they can do that' because that's what the union tells us. You hear it repeatedly."

Jordan, who has about ten years experience, echoed Alex's sentiments and asked, "Why am I paying $80 a month in union dues so the UAW can tell me 'they can do that?'"

"We see the union out golfing with the bosses, and that's a problem," Jordan said. "They are way, way, way too close. I'm out there working every day and the workers are tired of this. They are flat-out sick of this. Any time you have an interaction between the union and management, it's an act. It's all played-out and presented to you to make you feel like you got something good, like they saved your job.

"I like the idea of the rank-and-file committee because I'd rather have nine out of ten people on the floor go in there and represent me instead of the union.

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I'd rather have my buddy beside me on the line represent me than the UAW."

Alex described the UAW's role in policing the workers in the Bedford GM plant.

"After a couple of months of work here, my hands were so swollen that I couldn't drive. I had carpal tunnel in both hands, and prior to that I hadn't been to the doctor in ten years for anything other than a cold. You know what my union told me when I told them? They handed me a lawyer's card. Seriously. There is no hope for them. I was so upset that nobody could help me.

"We have temporary workers and flex people that they are working like dogs. They work them 12 hours a day, 7 days a week nonstop, and the union people say that's OK?"

"There's a young guy in here—a 25 year-old temp worker. He went up to the union committeeman and told him about how tough it was working long shifts and asked if anything could be done about it. The committeeman just said 'yeah, well get used to it' and turned around and walked away from him. My jaw was on the floor."

"The UAW is corrupt in the plant and it goes up to the international. I mean, who does the UAW think they are—the mob? The more I'm in it the more I see it."

Jordan expressed hostility to the recent UAW dues increase of 25 percent, which was forced onto the membership in 2014.

"If they wanted a dues increase, they should get us a pay raise! But now they just say we have to pay them the equivalent of 2.5 hours of our pay each month.

They're not bargaining for people anymore. I've been reading about the VEBA (retiree health care trust fund) thing. That's a money machine for them. The VEBA has got CEOs, a board of directors. Do you know how many times people say it's a conflict of interest? The UAW has people on the board! And the ex-vice president of the union is on the board of GM!"

Alex and Jordan each explained that hostility to the UAW has produced a growing interest in and support for the *Autoworker Newsletter* and its call for the building of rank-and-file committees to conduct a struggle of the working class independent of and in opposition to the UAW and the company.

"I'd say 90 percent of the people in this plant would support a rank-and-file committee," said Jordan. "If there was something like that, now is the time. You'd see people on board."

Alex said that the rank-and-file committees should conduct a nationwide strike of autoworkers.

"I think a national auto strike would be fabulous. That's what it's going to take. It really is. I believe that's what it's going to take to wake them up. We've given a lot in the last period since the last contract and management hasn't changed anything. "Yesterday our UAW committeeman came up to me and said 'they're in negotiations up there and the company isn't budging.' So my response was 'then that means we're going to go on strike, right?' He didn't like that. He turned around and walked off."

Jordan said that "the UAW has these 'Hollywood strikes' and it's all orchestrated. The company will agree, they'll say 'go ahead and do it,' and the workers will get fired up about it but it was known what the purpose was. They know it's just a show.

"The union and the company are hand in hand. So many people on the floor feel the same way, and from what I've read from the *Autoworker Newsletter*, I think you're right. I knew it wasn't just our plant, it's all over. We've got to bring the power back to the workers and get it back in our hands."

The WSWS is a forum for autoworkers to share their comments about the upcoming contract and the role of the company-UAW conspiracy against the workers. Workers are encouraged to send their comments and to contact the WSWS for interviews so their experiences can be shared with autoworkers and other workers around the world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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