

Autoworkers speak out

Young autoworker earns too little to keep car on the road

Jerry White
7 September 2015

It is often the case that during shift changes at automobile factories in the United States one will see scores of workers driving out of parking lots with cars badly in need of repair. These older models are generally driven by second-tier autoworkers whose wages of \$16 to \$19 an hour hardly enable them to keep their cars on the road and to get back and forth from work.

These same workers produce vehicles that can sell for \$30,000 - \$40,000 or more. On any given day, three shifts of workers, laboring for 10-hours each, can produce 1,200 vehicles, with one rolling off the assembly line every minute. The companies make up to \$10,000 in profits per vehicle for several SUV and other light-truck models.

The young autoworkers, however, average around \$680 a week, before taxes and union dues are deducted. Once they pay for food, utilities and other critical bills, particularly if they are raising children, there is little left to make a payment on a new or even used vehicle. Money spent on car repairs means skipping a payment on utilities or some other necessity.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a young worker, MaryAnn, from a Fiat Chrysler plant in Detroit. In order to protect her from retribution by management or the United Auto Workers, we are using a pseudonym.

The WSWWS spoke to MaryAnn at her house in Detroit as a neighborhood repairman was taking away her 2001 car to work on it. Only a few days earlier a failing alternator had caused the power to turn off as she was driving back from work on a local freeway.

“People on the outside say, ‘Hey, you work at Chrysler, you must be doing good.’ It may be better

than \$8-9 an hour job, but we have nothing left once we pay our bills. I bought my car used five years ago. I don’t want to make a new car payment; I’d rather be making a payment on a house if I can get one.

“It’s not easy. The American Dream is really a nightmare. You work hard and then you die—that’s the reality. Two people in a household can’t afford a new car. Instead they are struggling to keep the cars they have. It’s rent time now, and the \$300 I’m paying to get the alternator fixed is going to come from the \$750 I owe for rent.

“A lot of younger workers are still living at home with their parents, and they are not looking ahead at things like job security or owning a home. My dad worked in the plant for 30 years, and he didn’t want me to follow him. He wanted a better life for his kids. It used to be that the auto industry was one of the best places to work. Not anymore. After eight hours in there, your body shuts down. But you still have to work another two.

“On the assembly line you hear the squeaks and see the leaks. But they won’t shut it down. If the CEO, Sergio Marchionne, comes for a tour, they clean everything up. We have bins of parts that are so ragged that you cut your hands on the bottom. It gets fixed up with duct-tape.

“With our pay, any extra cost, like \$400 or something, throws a huge monkey wrench into your budget. It’s huge. The UAW officials are telling people to ‘save your money for a strike.’ How are we supposed to save anything? Now they are saying we would only get \$200 a week in strike pay.

“The older workers fought and had better conditions. The overall structure was better. There was more job

security, and wages were better. Now with the two-tier system, the UAW has workers divided against each other. There are divisions, but older workers try to teach the younger workers how it should be.

“We should all be united. But that wouldn’t be beneficial to the UAW. They want hostility and division in the plants.

“We don’t trust the UAW. Even if they called a strike, it would be for one or two days, to make us think we have power, and then behind the scenes they would sign another rotten deal. They haven’t told us anything. The union steward walks down the line and won’t even make eye contact in order to avoid talking to us. Workers ask him, ‘Hey, what is happening with the contract?’ He always has the same answer: ‘Nothing.’

“Now they have us wearing red t-shirts in the plant because, they say, it will show the managers that we are united. It’s BS. They are going to sell us out whether we wear a red shirt or a green shirt. The union will do what they want to do. I’ve gone to union meetings. The president doesn’t know how to talk to us. It’s offensive,. We’re adults, and he talks like we’re children. At one meeting a retiree got up and asked a question, and the president shouted, ‘You should have your own meetings.’ They talk aggressively to workers, and then they lay down before management.

“We’ve had workers post things on social media about what is happening in the plant and they get called into the union president’s office.

“I have a strong feeling they are going to make us work past the contract deadline, like they are doing to the steelworkers. Now the UAW is going around telling the second-tier workers that if they are not current on their union dues they cannot vote on the contract and won’t get a signing bonus.

“A lot of first-tier workers are schooling the younger workers about this. They say, don’t fall for the signing bonus. We need to get back the concessions we gave up. All the companies do is take, take, take. Workers create the wealth, but we are not wealthy. The billions we make are not invested in the factories—they are in disrepair or are being closed. They threaten us in order to get us to work for less.

“All workers should be united—autoworkers, steelworkers. We have a common fight not to be lied to and pacified but to get the real deal. The UAW and the United Steelworkers are pretty much against us. Unions

won’t unite workers; workers have to unite ourselves.

“The companies are greedy, but the workers aren’t. It’s insulting that we don’t make enough to feed our families. All workers face the same fight—what affects one of us, affects all of us. We are common links in a chain.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact