

Tennessee GM autoworker expresses solidarity with Fiat Chrysler workers

Our reporter
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A Spring Hill, Tennessee, General Motors (GM) worker with nearly 40 years' experience in the auto industry spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. He expressed solidarity with Fiat-Chrysler workers who are continuing their opposition to the contract the United Auto Workers union (UAW) is pushing.

The worker expressed disgust at the UAW's engagement of the public relations firm BerlinRosen to sell the deal to the rank-and-file. "It is a crock, hiring an outside PR firm to convince the workers," he said. "If you went to a car lot and wanted to buy a car, would you have to hire a PR agent to go talk your husband into it? If it's such a good deal, why don't you go talk to your husband to convince him yourself?"

"For the last couple of contracts, they've been hiding things in there," he noted, referring to the revelations that the latest Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) contract includes a provision for doubling of temp worker hiring. "The UAW is not to be trusted."

He urged FCA workers to stand strong in the face of intensifying pressure from the union and the media, as well as from provocateurs on social media. "Since the last Chrysler terms agreement, there are trolls, spies, or whatever you want to call them, on Facebook, posting about how *great* the contract is.

"They are generally trying to break down the negatives of the agreement, preaching its virtues. I believe that's why there's a big time gap between the rollout and the vote—to plant a seed of doubt that that's as good as it gets, with scare tactics of plant closings."

"There is hate and distrust being sown," he said. "What's bothering me is there is a lot of dissension in the ranks. For the first contract, they all voted no. Now there are divisions; they're calling each other names."

He added, "The more information you can get, the better it is for you."

Spring Hill has undergone extremely rapid growth over

the past 15 years, growing from a population of 7,700 at the 2000 Census, to more than 34,000 today. The town boasts an official poverty rate of 3.7 percent and a median household income of just under \$76,000. In the state of Tennessee as a whole, on the other hand, one in six lives in poverty and household income is \$44,000—well below the national average.

Situated 30 miles south of Nashville, Spring Hill revolves around manufacturing, and became identified nationally as the site of Saturn car production in 1990. Saturn was a subsidiary of GM established in 1985 in response to the rising popularity of smaller, more fuel-efficient Asian imports in the American market. The UAW established a separate even more concession-laden labor agreement at the Spring Hill plant based on "Buy American" nationalism and the corporatist outlook of "labor-management partnership."

Spring Hill Manufacturing produced Saturns through 2004, when the plant was re-absorbed by GM after the company and the UAW agreed to dissolve their separate labor contract for the Saturn line workers. Since then, the workforce has been subjected to a number of restructuring initiatives.

In 2007, the entire plant was idled for a year for retooling. In 2009, the vehicle assembly part of the plant was idled again as part of Obama's restructuring of GM. Further concessions from the UAW, including an expansion of the number of lower-paid second tier workers at the plant, along with retooling of the assembly lines led to its reopening in 2011. The factory was hailed for its added "flexibility" and "high efficiency" because it was capable of quickly retooling to produce different vehicles.

On the so-called "flex" product lines, GM employs almost exclusively second-tier workers, while first-tier workers run the traditional lines for "core" products.

The Spring Hill worker explained the division of labor

where he worked: “Stamping and paint are tier 1. The body shop is tier 2. They’re literally on the other side of the wall from us. They don’t want tier 1 in there with them.

“How can you have two separate contracts in one building?” he asked. “Here at Spring Hill, they’re going to be hiring 1,500 entry-level workers over the next year.”

According to a press release, applicants must “be willing to work day, afternoon or nighttime shifts as well as overtime hours on those shifts with little notice.” Noting that there was a sense of shock at the news among his co-workers, the Spring Hill worker speculated that all would be brought in as tier 2 workers. It is widely expected that the announcement will result in a crush of applications from impoverished workers in the region.

“The media is at fault for pitting non-autoworkers against those who are better paid,” he said. “If someone makes \$10 an hour, they look at me and say, ‘Christ, you’re making \$33 an hour and you’re bitching about it?’ Good money is \$18 to \$20 an hour.

“We built up the middle class, but we’re the working class. I’ve not had a raise in 10 years. We lost a dollar an hour to pay for health care. And working on an assembly line tears your body up. You do it all day long; my shoulders are torn up. It wrecks your body.”

Pointing to the profits of the auto companies, he added, “Everybody [in the workforce] wants to get rid of the two tiers. Back in 2009, Chrysler had \$4,000 in labor costs per vehicle. Now it’s \$1,100! You can’t claim poverty. Mexican workers only make something like \$12 a day, and GM does not lower the price of those vehicles. The Chevy Avalanche sticker’s at \$51,000.

“If you go in a mechanic to get a new muffler put on your car, it will cost \$400 or \$500,” he said. “Most of that \$400 is in labor costs.

“But the guy that puts that muffler on at the plant, he probably put that on for 70 cents, in 50 seconds’ time. He gets none of the money for the value of that job.”



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