

Low-wage America

Detroit auto parts worker endures homelessness, surrenders custody of children

Our reporter
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The recent report that a Detroit auto parts worker and his wife had made the wrenching decision to turn their children over to the care of the state of Michigan's child protective services because they were not able to provide them a place to live is a further exposure of the dire conditions facing manufacturing workers in the United States.

According to a report sponsored by the *Detroit News* and PBS NewsHour on the epidemic of childhood asthma, Dwayne Cole and Siretha Lattimore decided in late October to turn their four children over to the state's care under conditions where they were living in the family car. The cold temperatures had caused the health of the couple's nine-year-old son Malik to worsen. The child suffered from asthma, and his breathing difficulties had increased.

The Cole family had been living without a home for about a year, despite the fact that Dwayne had full-time work. The meager wage he earned, about \$12 an hour or \$24,000 a year, was not enough for the couple to both pay for a car, which Dwayne needed to travel to work, and pay rent on the home where they lived.

The couple's three other children, Jaretha Cole, age 11, Shamika, age 7, and Jaden, age 4, were also turned over to the state. Jaden has autism.

The situation facing the Cole family illustrates the brutal reality facing tens of millions of low-wage workers in America. It is also an indictment of the United Auto Workers (UAW), which has overseen the transformation of the auto parts industry from a relatively high-paying occupation into a cheap labor sector. The choice facing the Cole family of paying rent or meeting other basic necessities is a dilemma that increasing numbers of workers confront every day.

Shelby, an auto parts worker at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan, north of Detroit, where starting pay is currently around \$12 an hour, said that she understood what the Cole family was going through. Shelby earns around \$16 an hour with nine years on the job.

"It is ridiculous. It is hard when you have a mortgage and insurance to pay, and everything is going up except wages. You have to make a decision if you want to put gas in the car or buy food. There is no extra, and there are two of us working.

"If you go into Nexteer as a single working mother, you can't afford to pay rent. There are people who have a 30-minute drive to work. That's a lot of money in gas. You have people who come in and don't even have lunch. I don't understand how the union and the company get away with this."

The exposé on the plight of the Cole family follows a report earlier this year about another Detroit auto parts worker, James Robertson, age 56. He was forced to walk 21 miles daily, one way, to his job at Schain Mold & Engineering in Rochester Hills because he could not afford a car on his pay of just \$10.55 an hour.

In both the case of the Cole family and the situation facing Robertson, the public exposure of their plight led to an outpouring of support. A local charity says it will make a house available to the Cole family, while Robertson received more than enough in donations to cover car expenses.

However, the turn to charity can do nothing for the millions in similar straits. The United States, which once had the highest-paid manufacturing workforce in the world, now is the home to tens of millions who are struggling to put a roof over their heads and feed their

families.

The talk, endlessly touted by the Obama administration, of an economic recovery, has nothing to do with the reality facing millions of workers. According to a 2014 report by the National Employment Law Project, “Manufacturing Low Pay, Declining Wages That Built America’s Middle Class,” more than 600,000 US manufacturing workers earn \$9.60 an hour or less. One out of four earn \$11.91 an hour or less.

Real wages for auto parts workers fell by 14 percent between 2003 and 2013 alone, nine times faster than the wages in all occupations. This is under conditions where the US has added 350,000 jobs in the auto industry since 2009.

The poverty wages earned by a large segment of auto parts workers are not enough to support a single individual, let alone a family. Yet millions are forced to work at these pay levels given the collapse of the trade unions, in particular the UAW, and their transformation into appendages of management.

Beginning in the 1980s, the UAW has overseen the transformation of the auto parts industry into a low-wage sector. It has intervened to block the efforts of auto parts workers to resist these conditions and isolated and sabotaged the struggles of workers where strikes have broken out.

The most recent example is Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan. Formerly part of General Motors, the operation was spun off to Delphi, where workers took drastic pay cuts. In 2010, the UAW helped impose another pay cut and in addition saddled workers with a two-tier pay system, with new hires making \$12 an hour.

In 2015, workers were determined to win back lost concessions, voting by a 97.5 percent margin to reject a sellout contract negotiated by the UAW. After calling a token one-day strike, the UAW came back with another concession-ridden contract proposal that maintained the two-tier wage and offered paltry wage increases to senior workers.

The case of the Cole family has evoked justifiable public sympathy and anger. But far from being the exception, their situation is becoming more and more the rule for working class families. It must redouble the determination of class-conscious workers to fight for the political, social and economic reorganization of

society on a socialist basis.



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