

Anger mounts over hidden contract terms

Ford workers denounce UAW-backed poverty wages at Michigan stamping plant

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Ford's Woodhaven Hot Metal Forming plant, located approximately 10 miles south of Detroit, Michigan, stretches across 360 acres of land with a plant size of 2.7 million square feet, or 248,000 square meters. Opened in 1964, Woodhaven once employed 5,000 workers to make door panels, floor pans, hoods, quarter panels, roofs, tailgates and truck body sides.

Today the plant, formerly known as Woodhaven Stamping, has approximately 500 employees producing the same volume of work. The stamping process transforms a flat sheet of steel into the angular and curved components of vehicles at a single smashing blow. At Woodhaven Ford Motor Company is applying, with the full complicity of the United Auto Workers, the same process to the factory's workforce, which will be reshaped into casual laborers earning poverty wages.

Based on terms of the 2015 UAW-Ford agreement the company is currently ripping out the existing lines of machinery to introduce new, faster equipment. The \$300 million project is predicated on contract language that prevents higher-paid "legacy workers" (earning around \$29 an hour) or even second tier workers, who earn between \$15 and \$19 per hour, from taking jobs on the new lines.

Ford workers have informed the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that all positions on the new hot metal machinery will be filled exclusively by new hires, that is, a third tier, who will start at \$9 per hour—fifty cents more than the state's minimum wage of \$8.50. These workers will top out at \$12 after years of service.

In the 2015 contract the UAW imposed a "competitive wage rate structure" on workers at the factory, as well as two other Michigan plants: Sterling Axle (2,100 workers) and the powertrain plant in Rawsonville (740 workers). The lower wages were necessary, the union claimed, to

save the plants from closing and compete with non-union suppliers.

However, workers report that new employees will be hired in at half of what the wage rate was supposed to be, according to the terms on page 228 (211A) of the contract, which said new workers "hired, rehired, or reinstated on or after" the effective date of the 2015 contract, would start at \$16.25 and max out at \$19.86 after four years.

A young worker with 2012 seniority told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "I am second tier unfortunately. We should all be making the same pay." When he voiced objections to the union about the plans to introduce a third tier, a union steward responded that the factory was not making enough money and the new \$9 pay scale was a good thing "to keep the plant open."

A die-setter with 27 years at Ford told the newsletter that everyone knows "Ford is making more money now than at any time in their existence." In every year since the Obama restructuring in 2009, the auto companies have racked up record profits.

"According to our plant chairman [the third tier] is good for our plant," the legacy worker continued. "I told him, 'What am I not seeing?'" The worker continued, "This is probably a good deal for the company, but not for us."

He went on to explain his contempt for the smug and pro-company outlook which permeates the privileged functionaries that make up the union apparatus. "My chairman said, 'You've only got a couple of years to go. What do you care about?'"

"If the people before me had said that, we would not have anything. I am looking out for the guy coming after me who has got to raise a family. In the 1970's there were 5,000 workers here. Now we are down to 500 and we are doing pretty much the same work."

"They want to get it down to 400 workers in the whole

place. I'm a die setter. In 2005 there were 60 of us. Now there are only 16, and the same work is getting done. Right now they want to cut three more."

For the UAW, the company's investment and the hiring of hundreds of new workers is a victory for its strategy of "in-sourcing" jobs. The growth strategy of the UAW is to entice the auto giants to relocate production from China, Mexico and other low-wage countries to the US by slashing wages and abandoning everything autoworkers fought for over generations. Under this scenario the bank accounts of the UAW are replenished with the union dues the next generation of workers will have to pay for the privilege of working back-breaking jobs at poverty wages.

Stamping plants are notorious for causing injuries and even deaths. Contract language that had been built up during years of struggle to protect worker safety, job security and general conditions in the shops has been systematically ignored and then scrapped as the UAW integrated itself into company management. Union operatives participate directly in both the supervision and the exploitation of workers and in the profits that result. The transformation underway at Woodhaven is a milestone in this process.

Two hot metal forging machines, backed by laser trimming units, have been purchased. As they come on line an initial group of 300 new hires will be brought into the plant, with a projected total for third tier workers of 1,000 spots.

The company plans to increase the rate of production from the current level of just over 600 units by as much as 50 percent, or up to as many as 900 parts per hour, with production running continuously 23 hours per day, with only six minutes required to change dies. At this writing we do not know the exact model of equipment, but a comparable machine made by Erie Corporation forms hot metal in a semi-liquid, or plastic, state with jets of hot air as it flies through the line. Such machines combine multiple technological marvels.

Rather than improving the conditions and livelihoods of the employees, however, these instruments are being used to do just the opposite.

Older, higher-paid workers, who have a greater sense of the past gains workers achieved, are being forced out and replaced. This attack has been prepared and facilitated by a campaign of lies and intimidation orchestrated by the UAW.

The implications for the working class are stark. "My daughter works at Staples for \$11 an hour and hates it," the veteran die-setter said. "But she has to do it because

the only other job she can get pays \$8."

Describing the recent contract, he commented, "Our leadership sold us out. I think there were hidden agendas in that contract. They are trying to get rid of us legacy people. They have two new hot metal presses that can produce 900 parts per hour. They are bringing in a third tier to work on them. We are not even considered for that work. We cannot even bid on the work. This has been bargained at the national level.

"[UAW president] Dennis Williams was talking big ten months ago about how we were going to get back what we had given up. A raise of 87 cents is an insult. I used to love to go to work. Now I feel like I have been wronged."

The UAW has done its best to conceal from workers the full extent of the attacks on jobs and compensation that is contained in the new agreement. More than 1,400 jobs cuts have already been announced at Fiat Chrysler plants in Sterling Heights, Michigan, and workers another FCA plant in Belvidere, Illinois could soon face layoffs.

A legacy worker at the Michigan Assembly plant in nearby Wayne, Michigan, where workers who manufacture the Ford Focus face similar job threats, told the newsletter, "We haven't heard anything about it yet."

He too was angered by the contract. "I don't believe any of it," he said. "They forced it through. I don't talk to the union. It has run its course. We need an independent organization. I don't trust any of them."

Referring to the report of a third tier at Woodhaven, he said, "I don't see how they can get away with it. There are so many workers on layoff. We are being laid off for a week in April, a week in May, two weeks in July and one week in August."

He too concluded in disgust, "The union is part of the company."



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