

Auto companies continue assault on jobs, working conditions

One year since 2015 US auto contract battle

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It has now been one year since the 2015 contract negotiations between the Big Three and the United Auto Workers, which saw a rebellion by rank-and-file autoworkers against the efforts of the UAW to force through pro-company agreements. The new contracts gave a green light for the destruction of jobs and the continued erosion of workers' living standards.

This outbreak of workers' anger took the UAW, corporate management, the establishment media and the Obama administration by surprise. After decades of relentless attacks on jobs and living standards, workers were determined to fight back. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* played a critical role in the autoworker rebellion, advancing a program and analysis for autoworkers to carry forward their struggle.

One year after the initiation of this struggle, it is clear that the warnings raised by the WSWS about the nature of pro-corporate deals imposed by the UAW are being borne out. With the assistance of the UAW, the auto companies are seeking to attack autoworkers on several fronts.

As the anniversary of the 2015 contract expiration passed, Ford announced that it is ending small car production in the United States. The company said it planned to shift most of its small car operations around the world to low wage areas by 2019. The 2015 contract agreement sanctioned these changes.

This follows the announcement earlier this summer by Fiat Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne that the company is ending passenger car production in the US. The announcement coincided with the layoff of a full shift, 1,300 workers, at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) outside Detroit. These were the first permanent layoffs since Fiat Chrysler emerged from bankruptcy in 2009. The company is in the midst of a

reorganization of production, the full impact of which is not yet known. Remaining workers at SHAP have been left in limbo, not knowing if they will have jobs going forward once the plant stops building the Chrysler 200 passenger car in December of this year.

Meanwhile, Fiat Chrysler is attempting to implement a reorganization of skilled trades work with the connivance of the UAW. The company wants to create a new class of "conductors," essentially forcing production workers to perform basic maintenance now performed by better-paid skilled tradesmen. The UAW is seeking to ram through these changes without a vote in the name of promoting "competitiveness."

The contracts rammed through by the UAW have set a pattern that the Detroit-based auto companies are seeking to follow in negotiations with Canadian autoworkers. The Unifor union, formerly the Canadian Auto Workers, has set a Monday strike deadline in contract talks with General Motors. In comments this week, UAW President Dennis Williams predictably refused to spell out any concrete solidarity action that the American union would take in support of Canadian GM workers. Indeed, the last thing the UAW wants is to encourage a militant struggle by workers in Canada, or any other part of the world.

Since the signing of the 2015 contract, all the automakers have been recording record profits. However, in recent months there have been signs that the boom in auto sales following the 2009 forced bankruptcy and reorganization of GM and Chrysler is coming to an end. This presages further attacks on the living standards of autoworkers, as management seeks to offset falling sales by driving up productivity and cutting costs.

During the 2015 battle, the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* stressed the need for workers to construct

new organizations of struggle in opposition to the UAW as the first necessity of waging a serious fight against management.

A worker at the Jeep complex in Toledo, writing in to the WSWS this week, said, “I was brought in full time in 2013 and thought both the union and management took advantage of the fact that new hires didn’t know the full contract language or any of our rights. It hasn’t gotten much better in the following three years; there seems to be no solidarity among union members, even to the point that the union seems to be hiding information.

“Many hourly workers perform jobs or duties they aren’t supposed to because management has them convinced they’ll get in trouble if they don’t, and the union often lets the problem go unaddressed. Even when grievances are filed for unfair treatment, there is little to no headway made against the problem.”

The 2015 contracts maintained the two-tier wage structure, removing any cap on the number of lower paid tier-two, now called “in progression,” workers that could be hired. While “in progression” workers received pay increases, it still takes eight years for them to reach the top pay scale. Meanwhile, senior workers, whose wages had been frozen for 10 years, received a miserable 3 percent annual increase.

Mary, an “in progression” worker at the Fiat Chrysler Warren Stamping plant north of Detroit, spoke to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* about her experiences under the 2015 contract. “Even after one year we haven’t gotten all the things they said were negotiated. Our legal services are not going to start until November 1. That is one year after the contract took effect. We lost a whole year.”

Fiat Chrysler workers decisively rejected the first contract brought back by the UAW for ratification in September 2015. The UAW responded with a barrage of lies and threats aimed at intimidating workers in order to secure a “yes” vote. The new agreement submitted by the UAW for ratification was in all essentials a repackaging of the same deal previously rejected by the workers.

“Quite frankly the last contract wasn’t great,” said Mary. “The contract created a new pay scale for Temporary Part Time [TPT] workers and workers at Mopar [parts distribution center]. It is basically a third tier. Previously TPTs were paid at the same scale as

regular workers. Now they have their own [lower] pay scale. A lot of TPTs work on our line and are maxed out making \$19 an hour. We now have a division among TPTs, some under the old scale and some under the new. I feel badly for them. Any kind of subclass is not good.

“I worked as a TPT before I was hired full time. It was chaotic. They cut our pay several times and then brought us back up again. They kept promising us they would bring us in as full time and kept changing it. The majority had to take a pay cut when we finally got hired in full time.

“They have proven that even when times are good they can create a new, lower pay system. If there is a downturn, there will be nothing to stop them from taking more of our wages. It is common knowledge that the UAW is a joke. This job is too much BS for too little money.”

This author also recommends:

The Great Autoworkers Struggle of 2015
[SEP Pamphlet Series from Mehring Books]



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact