

The fight to defend jobs and the lessons of the 1972 Lordstown strike

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Since the layoff of the second shift in June, speculation has mounted that the General Motors Lordstown, Ohio, assembly plant faces closure. According to press reports, GM spokesperson Kim Carpenter refused to deny the threat hanging over the heads of the remaining workforce at the facility, which produces the Chevrolet Cruze.

Carpenter would only say that the company continues to look for “greater efficiency and capacity utilization” across the corporation’s holdings. In meetings with Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown and Democrat Congressman Tim Ryan, GM CEO Mary Barra refused to provide a commitment to keep the plant open.

GM has already cut 3,000 jobs at Lordstown over the past two years, ending two of the three shifts. Four other GM plants already operate with significant “unused capacity” in Kansas City and at Michigan operations in Lansing, Hamtramck and Lake Orion.

Auto workers have few illusions that the United Auto Workers (UAW) will lift a finger to defend their jobs. The union has acted for decades as a junior arm of the auto corporations, colluding with the Detroit Three to increase the profits of the auto magnates on the backs of workers. Simultaneously, the UAW bureaucracy has enriched itself through corporate management schemes and, in the case of union executives at Fiat Chrysler, accepted millions of dollars in bribes to push through concessions contracts.

Lordstown workers are familiar with the treachery of the UAW. Earlier this year, UAW Vice President for GM Cindy Estrada (now the vice president for Fiat Chrysler, and whose charity is under investigation) and Local 1112 leaders signed a secret Memorandum of Understanding with management. The deal allowed the company to hire lower-paid contract workers with GM Subsystems to take jobs formerly held by veteran plant workers.

There is no shortage of examples demonstrating the treachery of the UAW.

An examination of the strike at Lordstown in 1972 will shed further light on how the union has acted, alongside management, to suppress the strivings of workers for decent jobs and conditions inside the plants.

The 1972 GM Lordstown strike

In 1970, a 58-day strike at most GM plants over the national contract resulted in small wage gains in exchange for guarantees of increased productivity (i.e., speed-up, increased discipline, company-friendly layoff language) in the plants. The *Wall Street Journal* immediately took the measure of the strike. The strike was designed from the outset, it stated, “to help wear down the expectations of members...to create an escape valve for the frustrations of workers bitter about what they consider intolerable working conditions,” and to “strengthen the position of union

leaders.”

Such was the collaboration between the UAW and GM during the strike that GM lent the union \$30 million to cover the UAW’s depleted strike insurance expenses and prevent the dispute from going beyond the control of the union when local negotiations around the country held up the final ratifications.

In 1971, in order to stem a run on the dollar and rising inflation, President Nixon unpegged the American currency from the gold standard, abrogated long-standing international monetary arrangements as outlined in the global 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, implemented a national 90-day wage freeze and created a National Pay Board empowered to limit wage increases and retroactively roll back wage gains above 5.5 percent in any industry. The unions, including UAW President Leonard Woodcock, took seats on the board, which insisted on measures to increase productivity as a trade-off for any future wage hikes.

Built in 1966, the factory at Lordstown employed 13,000 mostly young workers and was one of the most technologically advanced assembly plants of its time, featuring extensive robotic welding processes and the breakdown of countless assembly jobs into extremely short, repetitive tasks to produce subcompact models. General Motors had recently created a GM Assembly Division (GMAD) to combat the growing competitiveness of Japanese imports by squeezing as much as possible out of the work process. Such were the efforts to micro-manage time and motion on the line, GMAD calculated that for each additional half-second worked each hour, the company would save \$1 million annually.

The imposition of the GMAD model at the plant would quickly make the word “Lordstown” interchangeable in general conversation with the deep opposition of workers everywhere to the gruelling industrial work process.

By the fall of 1971, GMAD imposed a massive speed-up on the line to produce the new Vega. It laid off 300 workers while simultaneously increasing the line speed from 60 to 101 cars per hour. This was the fastest line speed in the world at the time, outpacing Ford Dagenham in England and GM Cologne in Germany, which previously held the European record at 72 cars per hour.

Lordstown workers responded with a brief wildcat strike unsupported by the union. Workers, unable to keep up and facing continuous health and safety hazards, sent unfinished cars down the line. Soon the plant repair lots were full of cars requiring extensive servicing. Management responded by sending workers home regularly without pay whenever the lots overflowed. Absenteeism in the plant ballooned to as much as 20 percent. By the end of the year, there were more than 5,000 grievances filed. As one worker explained at the time, “You call your committeeman. He comes and writes something on a piece of paper and goes away. And that’s the last you ever hear of it.”

By January 1972, a shop floor explosion was brewing. Overt sabotage on the line now became commonplace. Workers were suspended or fired. The local union, trying to maintain at least a shred of credibility, issued

leaflets feverishly denouncing the company, but nevertheless instructing workers to follow the “laws” of the contract, avoid any illegality and continue production. The tactic was not successful, and by February the local was forced to call a strike vote. An unprecedented 85 percent of the workforce turned out to vote 97 percent in favor of industrial action.

The growing militancy of workers at Lordstown did not occur in a vacuum. Following on the heels of the burgeoning anti-war and civil rights movements of the late 1960s, the years 1970-1972 saw a strike wave sweep across the United States that rivalled the mass strikes of 1945-1947. Internationally, the 1968 general strike in France was followed by strikes and plant occupations in the Italian “hot autumn” of 1969. A 10-day Common Front general strike in Quebec, Canada, in 1972 mobilized a quarter of a million workers. Industrial action by British miners in 1972 and again in late 1973-1974 reduced the country to a three-day work week and in 1974 brought down the Conservative Heath government. In Chile, workers’ committees, fearing an impending fascist coup in 1973 against the radical Allende government, were calling for arms to defend themselves. In 1974, workers as well as soldiers returning from the bloody African colonial wars overthrew the fascist dictatorship in Portugal.

Despite the wave of radicalization and militant struggles, the mass movements were ultimately smothered by the social democratic and Stalinist parties and trade union bureaucracies around the world. In the US, the right-wing UAW bureaucracy moved to head off the strike at Lordstown, which threatened to mobilize auto workers across the country who were chafing under the yoke of GMAD, layoffs and speed-up. Already, thousands of workers at GM plants in Norwood and Mansfield, Ohio; St. Louis, Missouri; and Flint, Michigan, were calling for strike action.

When the Lordstown strike began on March 5, 1972, UAW executives immediately signaled to the company that strike benefits would not be available “for too long” and that a continuance of the action beyond the 30-day supply of Vegas at national dealerships would be undesirable. The UAW further let it be known that a re-hiring of the 300 laid-off workers from 1971 would settle the strike without addressing the speed of the track. Twenty-two days later, the strike was over. GM agreed to re-hire the laid-off employees and drop disciplinary sanctions against 1,400 workers. The deal did not address the central issue of line speed-up.

Disgusted with the union, only 40 percent of workers turned out to vote, still registering a 30 percent “no” vote. This did not prevent local UAW President Gary Bryner from announcing a “total victory.”

Justifying the betrayal, he cynically told an interviewer, “If a guy is running for union office, he may make a lot of promises, and if a worker is naïve enough to take his statements at face-value I suppose he’s going to be disappointed. When you look at it realistically, we set out to change nothing in the strike. We said, let’s return to the condition of October and we’ll wait until 1973 to negotiate all other issues (in the upcoming national contract).”

Needless to say, the 1973 national contract negotiation did not redress the issue of speed-up in the plants.

With the strike over, by late March 4,000 workers at Norwood GM (located in an enclave of Cincinnati, Ohio) set to strike in April were left isolated. With other plants making the same Firebird and Nova models produced at Norwood, the UAW made no attempt to stop production in those other plants. With high inventories and low sales, GM kept Norwood workers out for a record 174 days, eventually forcing a return to work with none of the workers’ demands met.

During these events, the Workers League—forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party—campaigned at Lordstown, Norwood and throughout the GM footprint of plants across the country for a national strike against GMAD until all work process grievances were settled, all layoffs rescinded, and all disciplinary suspensions and firings lifted with full

restoration of back pay.

The Workers League further advanced the demand for the unions repudiate their support for the pro-capitalist Democratic Party and build a Labor Party based on socialist policies. The aim of this demand, which found widespread support among rank-and-file workers, was to develop a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy and win over the most advanced workers to the perspective of building a revolutionary, socialist movement.

The grim litany of union double-dealing at Lordstown showed the perfidity of the right-wing UAW bureaucracy. Its pro-corporate, nationalist perspective would, with the advent of globalized production in the 1980s, provide the impetus for the transformation of the UAW into the junior partner of the corporations. Transnational companies, like GM, Ford and Chrysler, could now shift production rapidly to all points of the globe.

Based on their nationalist and pro-capitalist program, the unions reacted to the rise of globalized production and the crisis and decline of US capitalism by abandoning the struggle for even limited gains. The nationally based unions lined up ever more directly with American big business to shore up national industry against its overseas rivals. The resultant “whip-sawing” of jobs, wages and working conditions across borders set the stage for a headlong race to the bottom for the living standards of the working class in every country.

The unions can no longer be called workers’ organizations. They have been transformed into tools of corporate management and enforcers of sweatshop conditions. Over the past four decades, the unions have worked to systematically isolate and suppress all opposition to the dictates of corporate management. As the corruption scandal engulfing the UAW has demonstrated, the UAW executives not only serve the companies, they are paid directly for their services.

To defend the right to well-paying, safe and secure jobs, to abolish the hated two-tier wage and benefit system, and win full-time positions for all TPTs, auto workers must break with the UAW and elect rank-and-file committees in every factory.

These committees must take up the functions long abandoned by the UAW—addressing workers’ grievances, opposing speedup, jobs cuts and the victimization of militant workers. The committees should declare that the 2015 contracts signed by corrupt bribe-taking UAW officials are null and void, and fight to mobilize all auto and auto parts workers throughout the US and internationally in common struggle.

Above all, the fight to defend jobs is a political one, requiring a struggle against capitalism to end the dictatorship of the billionaires and corporations over all aspects of economic and social life.



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