Detroit public meeting resolves to organize fight against General Motors plant closures

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A public meeting held yesterday afternoon in Detroit, called by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter,* resolved to organize a fight back against General Motors' plans to close five plants in the United States and Canada and lay off 15,000 workers.

The meeting was the only one of its kind called to oppose GM's plant closures, which the United Auto Workers (UAW) and its Canadian counterpart, Unifor, have made clear they will do nothing to oppose. A decade after the 2008 global financial crash and the forced bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler overseen by the Obama administration, the meeting gave voice to workers' growing determination to fight, across the US and internationally.

Autoworkers attended from the GM Detroit-Hamtramck plant, which is targeted for closure, as well as from Ford, Fiat Chrysler and GM plants across Michigan. A carpool of autoworkers came from Indiana. Workers from other industries as well as college students were also present. Shannon Allen, an Amazon worker from Haslet, Texas, was on the speakers' platform and addressed the meeting.

At the conclusion, the attendees voted unanimously to adopt a resolution calling for the formation of "rank-and-file committees, independent of the UAW, Unifor and other unions, in all the affected workplaces and neighborhoods, to organize opposition to the plant closures."

The meeting was chaired by Lawrence Porter, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US). The opening report introducing the resolution was delivered by WSWS Labor Editor Jerry White. "What is under discussion today is: What is the way forward," White said. "How do we take forward the independent initiative of the workers? The unions won't fight, so workers have to organize new forms of struggle, independent committees… to mobilize all workers to defend the right to jobs, health care, public education, a pension."

"The battle lines are being drawn," he declared. "The entire political establishment is lining up against autoworkers… We must not put our faith in either of the corporate-controlled parties. They all are telling us it's the Chinese, it's the Mexicans, it's the immigrants." The audience applauded as White concluded: "No. It's capitalism. It's a system that subordinates the rights and needs of all working people to the profits of the rich."

The report was followed by a lively discussion, with powerful contributions from autoworkers that expressed their determination to fight back and widespread hostility to the corporatist UAW.

A female Ford worker from Dearborn described her experience of the 2015 auto concessions contract, which the UAW imposed through a combination of lies and intimidation, with widespread allegations of ballot stuffing. "Jobs were being threatened and people were in tears," she said. "Every union rep there first said that the contract was bad. Then [UAW Vice President for Ford] Jimmy Settles showed up, and suddenly… it turned from the worst thing ever to the best thing in the world, overnight… It told all of us that our union isn't for us. They're not working in our best interests.

"We were trying to meet outside of union meetings, outside of work, in order to come together and get resolutions and solutions. We thought, if I don't understand something in the contract, this person might, so we get together and break it down ourselves, so we can get better knowledge and do things on our own. The union is lost; it's not what my granddad said it was."

A Chrysler worker called the UAW "controlled opposition" against workers, where "every concession is nothing more than an aspect of attrition in their war." He added, "If workers don't unite internationally around the world, and we have the numbers, then we will lose this battle."

The worker asked the whether "workers forming these rank-and-file committees would be permitted to use the WSWS as a communicating tool, as a voice and unique educator? And will the Socialist Equality Party provide the leadership so that we can go on and function on a strategic level? Because we can already do it on the operational level."

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A Chrysler worker who previously worked at General Motors and was raised in Flint, said: “GM didn’t just start this now. They’ve been doing it for years. I have GM in my DNA. That’s all there was in Flint. They came in and snatched the heartbeat out of the city. If you go out there now it touches my heart because I couldn’t move back home. I couldn’t raise my children. Something needs to be done about these large corporations that rip the heart out of these communities.”

Another Fiat Chrysler worker noted that “not long ago the UAW started taking strike funds out of our checks. We all thought it was strange that they were doing that.” She asked if there “is anything we can do to get our funds back.” She added that she was “in full support of this resolution. In our plant we have hundreds of two-tier workers. They [the UAW] have divided us so we have nowhere to go.” She called for a united struggle between workers of all tiers.

During the discussion, Amazon worker Shannon Allen was introduced to the meeting with a showing of her video, in which she opposed the efforts by Democrat Bernie Sanders to use her videos to promote his political maneuvers and called for a united struggle by Amazon and other workers internationally.

“There’s been employees that have died at Amazon, and nobody even knew that they had died, because they separate us apart so far, they don’t want us talking,” Shannon said. “They don’t want us getting together and comparing stories.”

Pointing to the objective unification of Amazon and autoworkers, Shannon said: “We ship a lot of car parts through Amazon. I can’t tell you how many brakes and drums I’ve picked up and counted in my bins. The working class, we need to link together.” Autoworkers applauded as she declared: “Without you, there’s no us, and without us, there’s no you.”

Shannon added, “There should be a website where the working class [comes together], not just me, not just GM workers, not just Ford or Chrysler, but teachers, Walmart workers, McDonald's workers, Dollar General workers.”

She concluded to another round of applause: “We’re the ones who make the world go round. It’s not the Jeff Bezoses of the world. It’s us! It’s our backs that go into that. It’s our legs, our feet, our wrists, our mental [health]. We need to stand up. You need to talk to your co-workers and speak up because that is the only way anything is ever going to get things done. That’s why I decided to speak up a long time ago.”

In the course of the discussion, the meeting also heard greetings from WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North, who was speaking online from New Zealand while on an international tour in which he is giving public meetings marking the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International in 1938. The meeting was also addressed by Joseph Kishore, the Socialist Equality Party national secretary. Alex Lantier, the national secretary of the Parti de l’égalité socialiste (Socialist Equality Party) of France, spoke online about the explosive “yellow vest” demonstrations that have shaken the country for the past month.

“The working class,” Kishore said, “is the most powerful social force on the planet, but it needs organization and political perspective.” He explained the role of the parties of the ruling class in seeking to divide workers, with the Democrats promoting the politics of race and gender and the Trump administration seeking to blame all social problems on immigrants and refugees.

North noted that “what really lies behind this meeting is a global breakdown of the capitalist system.” Pointing to the significance of the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International, he noted the parallels between that period and the situation confronting the working class today. “It was a period when the working class was seeking to fight back in struggle against the system,” he said. “But the great problem that the working class confronted in the 1930s was of revolutionary leadership… The betrayal of the old organizations led to a situation in which fascism dominated and, ultimately, war erupted, with catastrophic consequences.”

“The task now which we confront is the creation of a new leadership,” North continued. “Much has been said this afternoon about the betrayals of the UAW and the unions. We all know that is the case. But it isn’t enough to point to the betrayal of other organizations. What we have to come to grips with is what it means to build another leadership. That is our responsibility. To the extent that we understand that the old organizations in no way speak for the working class, we have all the greater responsibility to take the place of the organizations that have failed and provide the working class with a new way forward.” He called on workers present to draw the conclusions of the discussion and to join the Socialist Equality Party.

After the meeting, many workers stayed behind for discussion and to purchase literature from Mehring Books.

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