Ford production crippled by Mexican workers' strike

Jerry White
27 February 2019

The strike by tens of thousands of *maquiladora* workers in Matamoros, Mexico, across the border from Brownsville, Texas, has had a crippling effect on production at major auto assembly plants in the United States and Canada, which are owned by Ford and other automakers.

After concealing this fact for more than six weeks after the January 12 strike began, the news media in the US is finally acknowledging the impact of the walkouts by 70,000 Mexican workers at foreign-based companies that supply steering wheels, seat belts and other parts to the Detroit automakers.

This impact on production was first reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* on January 19, based on reports from workers at Ford's Flat Rock assembly plant in suburban Detroit. Workers told the WSWS that the company was temporarily suspending production due to a shortage of steering wheels caused by the walkout in Mexico.

On Tuesday, the *Detroit Free Press*, which has very close ties both to the auto companies and the United Auto Workers (UAW), wrote, "A labor strike in Mexico forced Ford Motor Co. to build Mustang cars and Explorer SUVs with temporary steering wheels and hold thousands of the vehicles in nearby parking lots awaiting parts, the Free Press has learned.

"While waiting, Ford sent approximately 3,200 factory workers home for two weeks of unplanned down time at the Flat Rock Assembly Plant south of Detroit, the company confirmed Monday. In addition, workers at the Oakville Assembly Plant in Ontario were sent home for three days while waiting for parts to install in the Ford Flex and Lincoln Nautilus."

The newspaper reported that the supply of steering wheels had resumed as of Monday and that Ford planned to inform its Flat Rock workers that they would remain on two shifts for two weeks in April to make up for lost production.

"We had a parts shortage due to a supplier issue," Ford spokeswoman Kelli Felker told the *Free Press*. "It affected Flat Rock and Mustang, specifically. The Explorer was affected, and we did continue to build. We did not take down time at the Chicago Assembly Plant. We will be upfitting those vehicles affected by the [parts] shortage, just like Mustang." She added, "The situation is resolved. Parts are flowing."

While the statement by Ford did not mention the strikes in Mexico, the *Free Press* said its investigation pointed to "Mexico as the culprit." The newspaper pointed to Swedish-based Autoliv, which has plants in Matamoros and produces steering wheels.

The two Detroit daily newspapers (the *Free Press* and the *Detroit News*), along with the rest of the news media in the US and Canada, conducted a news blackout on the Matamoros strike. The media has been joined by the UAW and the Unifor union in Canada. This was driven by the fear that US and Canadian workers would emulate the actions of the Mexican workers who revolted against the corporate-controlled unions and organized independent strike committees to spread the strike across more than 45 factories.

What struck terror in the hearts of the corporate media mouthpieces and union executives most was the fact that the Matamoros workers issued calls for US workers to join their fight against the global automakers.

The promotion of the lie that Mexican workers are docile and satisfied with their miserable conditions and are offering themselves up as cheap labor to "steal" American jobs, has long been the stock-in-trade of the unions, Donald Trump and the Democratic Party. As US and Canadian workers see Mexican workers

© World Socialist Web Site

fighting back, they increasingly understand that the Mexican workers are not their enemies but their class brothers and sisters fighting the same global corporations and pro-company unions.

The striving by workers to unify across borders was highlighted by the video sent by striking workers at the Michigan-based Fisher Dynamics plant in Matamoros expressing their solidarity with the February 9 demonstration against GM plant closings organized by the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees.

The *Free Press* and the *Detroit News* were silent about the February 9 demonstration, which called for US and Canadian workers to build their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and explicitly called for the unity of all North American workers in opposition to the anti-Mexican campaign of the UAW and Unifor.

Now that several of the strikes have been settled, the media has begun to report on the impact of the strike. At the same time, industry analysts are warning about the dangers of an internationally coordinated struggle against the global automakers, which have long pitted workers against each other in a race to the bottom.

"These strikes underscore how highly integrated the supply lines are," Harley Shaiken, a professor at the University of California Berkeley, told the *Free Press*. "Most customers prefer steering wheels, so when you get this kind of disruption, it can paralyze production across North America. If you have labor unrest in Mexico, it impacts the U.S. And you have unrest now because you've had suppressed wages for decades."

Jeoff Burris, founder of Plymouth-based Advanced Purchasing Dynamics, a supply chain consultant to auto suppliers primarily in North America, told the *Free Press*, "Companies worldwide look to Mexico as a low-cost labor region that can easily and efficiently ship finished components throughout the U.S. and Canada."

Burris added, "It's not routine for Mexico to have labor disruptions that upset the making of vehicles… My concern is the new Mexico administration has kind of unleashed a genie in a bottle. They've built a huge amount of expectations. Those expectations are similar to what happened in the US in the 1960s and '70s, when strikes were very prevalent in the automotive industry. That's the thing I look at."

The new administration of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has in fact done everything it can to contain opposition while proposing to expand the number of free trade zones along the border.

Obrador's promise to double the minimum wage in more expensive communities along the US border to 176.2 pesos, or $9.28 a day, did not affect workers in the Matamoros factories who were already making the minimum wage. This sparked widespread outrage against the unions and corporations and the wave of strikes demanding "20/32," or a 20 percent pay raise and one-time 32,000 pesos ($1,662) bonus.

Over the last several weeks, the *maquiladora* owners, the unions and state authorities have stepped up the repression of strikers, including thug attacks by union bureaucrats and mass layoffs and victimization of strike leaders. This underscores the necessity of US and Canadian autoworkers coming to the defense of Mexican workers and establishing the closest links with them.

Two weeks before the *Free Press* article acknowledging the production slowdown in the US and Canada, a Flat Rock worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, "Astonishing that the walkout in Mexico, and particularly Ford's supplier of steering wheels SHUT THEM DOWN and there is zero coverage in any major media source. Not even the *Detroit News/Free Press*.

"Absolutely incredible how much power the worker has when it is exercised," he concluded, expressing his solidarity with the striking workers south of the border. "We need to stand united and, like our brave Mexican amigos, be willing to stand up and walk out," he said, referring to the upcoming struggle facing 150,000 GM, Ford and Chrysler workers whose contracts expire this September.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site