

Industry publication floats idea of UAW calling a “targeted” strike

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24 April 2019

With national contract negotiations between the Detroit car companies and the United Auto Workers set to start in a few months, industry analysts are nervously speculating about the possibility of a strike.

After decades of concessions contracts that have stripped workers of basic rights and benefits, anger is at a boiling point in the factories. Workers are determined to win back past concessions, including the elimination of multi-tier pay scales and halting the super exploitation of temporary part-time workers, which the auto companies are employing in ever increasing numbers.

Workers have been further outraged by the announcement by General Motors that it is closing five plants in North America and eliminating some 14,000 jobs under conditions where it is recording massive profits. This has been followed by layoff announcements by other automakers, including Fiat Chrysler, which is cutting a shift at its Belvidere, Illinois assembly plant.

In a comment published earlier this week industry publication *Automotive News* floated the idea of the use of selective strikes by the UAW when the current contracts expire. *Automotive News* called this taking a “more strategic approach” and cited a number of industry analysts who advanced arguments in favor of calling small, isolated walkouts at key plants as an alternative to an industry wide strike.

Of course *Automotive News* is not the least concerned with protecting the jobs and benefits of autoworkers. An article published by *Automotive News* last November in the wake of the announcement by GM of plant closures praised the “bold” action by management, stating that it would contribute to “changing the narrative from members wanting more to potentially just wanting to save jobs and plants.” The

author went on to assert that the threat of plant closings could be a “blessing in disguise for UAW leaders, who are fighting an internal battle with members following a federal corruption scandal.”

Talk of a strategy of “targeted” strikes mobilizing only a small fraction of the UAW membership expresses concern that a broader action could spin out of the control of the UAW. *Automotive News* is undoubtedly giving voice to discussions already taking place within the UAW leadership itself, whose authority has been crippled by its record of treachery and revelations of rampant corruption, including the payment of more than \$1 million in bribes by Fiat Chrysler to obtain favorable contract terms.

Talk of “targeted” strikes is therefore preparation for a new and even greater betrayal in the 2019 contract negotiations.

In the *Automotive News* piece, highly instructive are the comments of Art Wheaton of Cornell University who, noting the presence of large number of highly exploited temporary workers in the auto plants, workers utterly abandoned and betrayed by the union, warns, “you can’t say for sure they’re going to follow what the union wants to do.”

Automotive News suggests that if forced to call a strike the UAW should consider shutting down key factories such as the General Motors Toledo, Ohio transmission plant or Fiat Chrysler’s Kokomo, Indiana transmission operations, rather than calling a company-wide walkout. It cites favorably the UAW’s calling of a limited strike in 1998 at two GM plants in Flint, Michigan.

Adding to the attraction of selective strikes for the UAW is the prospect of saving millions of dollars in strike benefits. Further, the calling of isolated actions would tend to divide the rank-and-file, undermine class

solidarity and make it easier for the union bureaucracy to maintain control.

What happened in 1998? After 54 days on strike the UAW accepted a sellout deal of historic proportions that set the stage for the selling off of the GM Delphi parts division with the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs and the imposition of massive concessions.

Then, in 2007, the UAW called a two-day strike GM and a six-hour partial strike at Chrysler—dubbed “Hollywood” strikes by the media, because they were largely for show. After shutting down the strikes the UAW it rammed through a sellout deal that instituted a two-tier wage structure and established the VEBA, which allowed the auto companies to unload their retiree health care obligations, at a massive cost savings, to the UAW. This gave the union a massive slush fund and an economic incentive to reduce benefits to keep the fund solvent.

The abandonment by the UAW and other unions of company-wide and nationwide strikes has gone hand-in-hand with the corporatist degeneration of these organizations and their transformation into outright appendages of management. The last significant company-wide strike called by the UAW was the 28-day walkout at Ford in 1976, incorrectly reported by the *Automotive News* as taking place in 1978. At that time workers upheld the tradition of not returning to work until after a contract was ratified, a practice long since abandoned by the UAW.

In recent decades the tactic of the selective strike has become the standard. In every case where it has been employed the results have been disastrous, from the A.T. Massey and Pittston coal mine strikes to the 2015 strike by US oil refinery workers.

Following the *Automotive News* report many autoworkers posted comments denouncing the proposal for targeted strikes. One wrote: “Targeted. What a joke. IUAW will target the plants GM wants them to. This only ensures that no (high) demand product will be slowed down. IUAW is a Sham!”

These reports underscore the warning made by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that if the 2019 contract struggle remains under the control of the UAW the demands of workers will inevitably be suppressed and new, onerous concessions will once again be imposed. It raises the urgent necessity for workers to begin the fight now to organize rank-and-

file factory committees to begin preparations for an all-out fight.

This should begin by workers developing their own demands, based not on the profit requirements of the auto companies and Wall Street, but on the needs of workers. This must include the defense of all jobs, the rescinding of plant closings and the recall of all laid off and victimized workers with back pay.

All tiers must be eliminated, and all temporary part-time and contract workers must be hired as full time with all corresponding benefits and contract rights. All past concessions must be restored, including reinstituting the eight-hour day and abolishing the alternative work schedule. Cost of living allowances must be restored, and workers given a 40 percent raise to make up more than a decade of wage freezes. Pensions and medical coverage, fully paid by the corporations, must be restored.

This must be combined with the fight for industrial democracy and for workers’ control over production, line speed and health and safety conditions. Factory committees must oppose all management abuse and all forms of racial and sexual harassment.

The building of genuine working class organizations in the factories requires the forging of new leadership based on the fight for socialist principles. In opposition to the nationalist and pro capitalist program of the UAW workers must advance an international strategy, based on uniting workers across North America and globally against the profit system. This means rejecting all attempts to pit American workers against their class brothers and sisters in Mexico, Europe and Asia and advancing a common strategy to fight the transnational auto companies.

Workers interested in learning more about how to get involved are encouraged to contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.



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