

“It’s ludicrous the way they treat the temps”

GM autoworker speaks out on UAW corruption, upcoming contract fight

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Workers at Fiat Chrysler plants in Michigan and Illinois will begin voting today to authorize strike action when the labor agreements covering 44,000 FCA workers expire at midnight on September 14. Workers at General Motors, Ford and the remaining FCA plants will continue voting next week to endorse strike action if no agreement is reached on a deal covering a total of 155,000 GM, Ford and FCA workers in the US.

After suffering more than a decade of falling real wages, substandard pay and benefits for the younger generation of workers who must labor eight years to reach top pay and other abuses, autoworkers are determined to fight to win substantial gains from the automakers, which have made record profits since the 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and FCA by the Obama administration.

The UAW—which has not called a national auto strike since 1976—is determined to do everything to beat back workers and impose yet another pro-company deal. The corruption scandal engulfing the union has exposed the UAW as a wholly owned subsidiary of the auto companies whose “negotiators” are on the payroll of corporate management. That is why autoworkers must take the initiative now to block another sellout by forming rank-and-file committees in every factory to outline demands that workers need, not what management and the UAW says are affordable, and to prepare a national strike to shut down the auto and auto parts industry.

Given the global character of the industry, it is imperative that US workers reach out to workers in Mexico, Canada and around the globe to coordinate cross-border action to fight the attack on jobs and conditions by the transnational corporations.

The World Socialist Web Site recently discussed these issues with a veteran GM worker at the company’s Bay City Powertrain Plant in central Michigan. Located 115 miles north of Detroit, Bay City is one of many impoverished mid-sized factory towns that dot the state. From a high of 53,000 residents in 1960, the population has fallen to an estimated 33,000 today. The official poverty rate is 22.1 percent. To raise money, the cash-strapped city government has recently floated a plan to sell off the four drawbridges over the Saginaw River, the only roads connecting the two halves of the city, to private entities, which would charge tolls to motorists.

“At the Bay City GM powertrain plant there may be 300 people, less than that if you don’t count the part timers,” he said. As with other facilities run by GM, Ford and Chrysler, part-time workers have no rights and are subject to arbitrary treatment by management even though they pay union dues to the UAW. “It is ludicrous the way they treat the temps. Every Sunday night they call them and tell them what days they will be working the next week.

“One kid left a job at Home Depot because he was called and told to start work the following Monday at the plant. He was happy to be starting at GM and quit his job right then and there. Then they called him on Sunday and told him the last seven temps hired in they weren’t going to be hired in after all. His dad worked in the plant and everyone raised such a fuss that finally HR reversed themselves and hired the workers.”

He continued, “The lowest seniority temps get hit the worst. They were working five to seven days a week over a three-year period but now they’ve been cut back to two days a week. They just say, ‘we don’t need so

many people.’ And the union says, ‘they can do that.’

“Everyone where I am knows that if you file a grievance, the union committeeman will first go to management to hear their side before he has even heard yours!”

The autoworker traced the degeneration of the unions back to corporatist policies enacted by the UAW in the 1980s. “It all started with [UAW President Owen] Bieber back in 1982,” he said, referring to the former GM department head for the UAW who became union president in 1983. Two years after the UAW handed over massive concessions during the first Chrysler bailout, “GM came back and cried they were hurting so they reopened and renegotiated the contract. That’s when they came up with all these ‘jointness’ programs.” Bieber pushed through sellout contracts containing lump sum payments instead of wage increases and new committees jointly administered by the company and the union. Between 1982 and 2000, GM transferred \$3 billion to the UAW through joint training programs, which became the center of the illegal bribery schemes.

“When I don’t get to vote for the president and the vice president of the union then they feel they are untouchable and that they can do anything. They appoint our Benefit Rep, we don’t elect him, so does nothing. But that is how the whole international works. They took our plant chairman of our plant, plucked him right out of the plant, and brought him down to Solidarity House (the UAW headquarters in Detroit). He said he didn’t want to go, then they snap their fingers and he was down there in a minute.

“We sent two delegates to the national convention. They voted Gary Jones as president of the union. The next day he gave himself a 33 percent raise, or \$47,000 more. I only found this out a month later. Our two delegates did not come back and report this. We sent them to represent us and they did not even tell us that this happened. They came back and sat on their hands.”

The worker pointed to the globalization of the auto industry, which has resulted in the integration of production all across the world. “I used to work at Buick. Remember the big fuss, in the news and all, when people found Pontiac engines in Buick cars? Now the parts are from all over the world. No one blinks an eye. I wonder what the auto corporations are thinking with Trump in office? For the last 15 to 20 years they

have set up this worldwide system and now what?”

In fact, GM’s steering parts plants nearby Saginaw were first sold off to Delphi (the spinoff of GM parts division that went bankrupt in 2005), before being sold to Nexteer Automotive, which is owned by Chinese parts maker Pacific Century Motors. After workers at the plant overwhelmingly rejected a UAW-backed contract at the Nexteer plant in late 2015, the UAW called a 20-hour strike and then rammed through even deeper concessions.

The former Big Three industrial icons of American capitalism have been integrated into a complex system of global production and the struggle by giant transnational corporations to beat out competitors for markets and to dominate the new electric and self-driving technologies. This underscores the need to reject the nationalist poison promoted by the UAW, the Trump administration and the Democrats and fight for the international unity of autoworkers against the capitalist system.

“I was wondering why nobody was doing anything about this corruption thing. I read articles in the *Detroit News* but that was about it. Then I stumbled on your [WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*] articles. Since then, I have been reading them and so are others in the plant.”



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