

Allentown, Pennsylvania Advance Auto Parts distribution workers on strike

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On Wednesday about 550 workers walked out of the Advance Auto Parts warehouse in Weisenberg Township near Allentown, Pennsylvania. Their walkout comes as workers at plants across the United States vote overwhelmingly for strike action against the Big Three auto giants—GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler.

A year ago the workers voted to unionize with the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA). Negotiations began soon after. An agreement presented by the union this August was voted down by 90 percent of workers. Subsequent attempts by the union and management to forestall a strike failed, clearing the way for Wednesday's walkout.

According to a local media account, the union "did not see [the strike] coming."

"To start I did not," said Local 1310 business manager Tom Borum. "I thought with the company we went through some non-monetary issues rather well."

Starting wages at the facility are \$13 an hour. Even at full-time employment, this translates into just over \$27,000, barely more than the official poverty level for a family of four, which was fixed at \$25,100 in 2018. Advance Auto Parts workers at the Allentown plant report spiraling healthcare costs—with medical deductibles set at \$5,000. They are also subject to forced overtime.

"The pay is no good," Orlando Laboy told the *Allentown Morning Call*. "The medical program is worse, and we're trying to exercise our rights. That's why we're out here as a group."

Laboy described the way management sweats workers to squeeze extra profits. "Whenever the demand is high, they switch it on you," said Laboy, who makes only \$17 an hour after 10 years of work at the facility. "And you have to be there—10, 12, 14 hours until it's done. And there's no slack for workers."

The Morning Call reports that approximately 90 percent of the workforce is of Hispanic descent, and that chants on the picket line are in Spanish: "*Que queremos? Justicia! Cuando? Ahora !*"

A Fortune 500 company, Advance Auto Parts is capitalized at nearly \$10 billion. Thomas Greco, its CEO, pocketed \$8,856,135 in 2018, about 333 times what a starting, full-time worker earns at the sprawling 650,000 square foot Allentown distribution facility,

However, the Laborers International Union does not represent a way forward for the striking workers. The union counters the company's insulting offer of 1.5 percent raises—and this only for employees with more than 10 years' experience—with a \$1 increase per year over three years and an increase of the starting wage from \$13 to \$14 per hour.

"We believe that would put them in line with local warehouses," Borum said. The aim of the union, in the words of one of its officials is "to be a successful partner" to Advance Auto Parts. Less than 1 percent of the corporation's 71,000 workers are currently organized.

Unions such as the Laborers see the warehouse and distribution industry as a means of forestalling protracted membership decline and propping up bloated union salaries. As of 2015, there were 144 LIUNA officials who took home more than \$75,000 per year, paced by union president Terrence O'Sullivan, whose annual compensation was reported that year at over \$672,000.

Above all else, LIUNA will oppose any attempt by auto parts workers to link up with their natural allies in the global auto industry. But that is the only way forward. This was demonstrated last year by the strike of auto parts production workers in Matamoros, Mexico—who called for the solidarity of workers north of the

border—and this year by workers at the Big Three, who have voted overwhelmingly to strike amidst revelations that the UAW, the union that ostensibly represents them in negotiations, is bought-and-paid-for by the auto giants.

What is posed by these events is clear. The auto industry is a global industry that unites workers in production and distribution across national boundaries. Workers cannot fight this industry in isolation from each other. To prosecute this struggle requires a socialist perspective that makes conscious the international unity of workers, and rejects the claim, shared by the companies and unions alike, that there is not enough money for working class people to have a decent life.



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