

“It would be great for workers from different countries to band together”

GM Detroit-Hamtramck workers determined to fight as auto contract deadline approaches

A WSWS reporting team
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On Thursday, September 12 at 7:00 pm EDT, the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter is hosting an online meeting to discuss the strategy and perspective needed by autoworkers to organize their struggle. To participate, visit wsws.org/autocall.

With the contract for workers at General Motors set to expire at 11:59 pm Saturday night autoworkers are determined to resist concessions and win gains after decades of cuts.

Workers were reinforced by the walkout Monday of 10,000 GM workers in Incheon and Changwon, South Korea who are rebelling against demands that they accept a continued pay and benefit freeze. GM closed its Gunsan assembly plant in May 2018, destroying 2,000 jobs directly and many more indirectly. The company has not allocated a new product to one of its plants in Incheon and has threatened to attack more jobs.

On Tuesday, reporters from the World Socialist Web Site *Autoworker Newsletter* visited the GM Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant, one of the five plants in the US and Canada that GM has scheduled for closure. The shutdown date has been pushed back to January, after the 2019 contract negotiations. GM has made it clear that the plant closures will be used as a club to extract more concessions from workers.

A second tier two worker with four years at the plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter* he was very encouraged to learn about the strike by South Korean General Motors workers and supported their struggle.

“I wish we could all get together. They can’t fight us if we are all together.”

He said workers should reject the nationalist poison advanced by the unions that portrays foreign workers as the enemy. “They try to pit us against one another,” he remarked.

The young worker was not intimidated by management threats. Asked what he thought were the main issues in the upcoming contract he said, “tiers and health care.”

He continued, “A lot of us are risking our lives every day. Despite all the money GM is making they want to put a cap on everything, from profit sharing to pensions.”

He said he was angry that new workers were being denied the opportunity to earn pensions. “GM is the greediest of the Big Three. Everyone feels there will be a strike.

“Everything is quiet right now,” he added, noting the UAW had told them nothing about the progress of the negotiations.

“I am pissed.” He said workers would be reporting to the local UAW union hall later this week to get updates on preparations for a possible strike. “Tomorrow I will ask a bunch of questions.”

Another Detroit Hamtramck worker said, “I think it would be great for workers from different countries to band together. There are a lot of us, and only a few of them.”

“We’ve heard nothing,” said another worker, complaining about the news blackout by the UAW. “I think because there’s nothing good for them to tell us. They will try to force through a bad contract. I think it would be terrible if they go after our insurance. They’ve been trying to get at it for years. I need my insurance! I’m not getting any younger.”

A retired GM worker said he had heard that local UAW officials had been called to Detroit for a meeting on Sunday, September 15. “That usually happens when there is a tentative agreement,” he said. “These guys should not be allowed to negotiate,” he added, referring to the corrupt UAW bargaining teams who were bribed to sign pro-company contracts. “People need to take action. These guys are not going to change. Too much has gone on; it’s too late and too long. The retirees have not gotten a raise in over 10

years. It's now or never."

Like GM, Fiat Chrysler is using job cuts to try and blackmail workers into accepting a new round of concessions. Earlier this year, Fiat Chrysler eliminated the third shift at its Belvidere, Illinois Assembly plant. Many of those workers chose to transfer to other FCA plants in order to keep their jobs. The FCA Jeep complex in Toledo, Ohio has seen hundreds of Belvidere workers transfer recently. The transferred workers are being pitted against temporary part-time workers (TPTs) who are being told they must now wait indefinitely before being made full-time employees.

A young TPT worker at Jeep said that the UAW had told them nothing about the strike by South Korean GM workers. "I didn't know they even had plants over there," she said. "We don't like it," she added about the union's efforts to keep workers in the dark and disoriented. "Workers here don't trust the UAW."

She said that TPT workers were being told they would not be made full time employees anytime soon. "They say it will be 2-3 years because of the layoffs at the Belvidere Assembly Plant."

While autoworkers are determined to put an end to concessions, Wall Street is ramping up pressure on the auto companies to take even more cost savings off the backs of workers. Credit rating company Moody's downgraded Ford's credit rating to Ba1, "junk" status, a move that could make it more costly for the company to borrow. Moody's pointed to Ford's ongoing restructuring program, saying company executives were not moving fast enough to produce results.

This is an undoubted signal to management that Wall Street expects Ford to extract significant new concessions from workers, including deep cuts to health care benefits and an expansion of lower-paid temps and contract workers.

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* spoke to a second-tier worker from Ford Rawsonville just west of Detroit. After working three years as a temp, she has to work a second job to make ends meet.

In 2015, the UAW signed a letter of agreement with Ford that established a "new competitive wage structure" at Rawsonville, Sterling Axle and Woodhaven Stamping supposedly to "save" the plants from closing. The backroom deal established a new tier of even lower paid workers who max out at \$10 an hour less than higher seniority workers.

"When I run into the union and ask them about the contract, they don't have an answer for me," she said. "They don't want to talk about it. We have gone down in numbers here at my plant, down to around 400 people. Not a lot of people are left, many were transferred to Livonia. They got rid of the 2nd shift first, then they did away with the midnight shift. I was transferred to the day shift, and when I

saw my first paycheck after losing my shift premium I was stunned. It was a lot of money."

"Everyone was talking about the South Korean GM strike in the break room. They were saying that they are ready to follow suit here.

"Everybody has another job. Ubering, grocery shopping—everybody's doing something."

A veteran worker at Ford Dearborn Assembly said, "They've been real hush-hush... nobody says anything. There was a rumor that we would give up our profit share for a signing bonus of \$30,000, but for the four years you would not get profit shares. They didn't know if that was in addition to a signing bonus, but they said they wanted us to give up our profit share for a large sum of money.

"I've been there for four years, and I'll be honest, I hate the union because they don't represent like they should. For example, if your pay is short, I waited from December to April to get my money. And they [UAW] don't hold them accountable for messing up your check.

"You can't pay anybody if you don't know if your check is going to be right. Every week somebody faces the same thing and they are not doing anything about it."

If there is going to be a real fight, autoworkers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UAW and build rank-and-file factory committees to mobilize the full strength of autoworkers. These committees must formulate the demands workers need. This includes the abolition of the two-tier system, the conversion of all temporary and contract workers into full-time, a 40 percent wage increase, the restoration of benefits to retirees and a halt to all plant closings and the rehiring of laid off workers.

The central tasks of these committees will be to unify all GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers, to reach out to all sections of workers and young people for support, and to link up the struggle of American workers with autoworkers in Canada, Mexico, Korea and throughout the world.



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