

The struggle of autoworkers against GM, Ford, and Chrysler requires a global strategy

Jerry White**11 September 2019**

It is only a few days before the four-year labor agreements expire on September 14 for 158,000 General Motors (GM), Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers in the US.

Autoworkers are determined to fight back against declining real wages, the proliferation of low-wage and temporary work, and the attack on jobs and benefits. Earlier this month, workers voted by 96 percent to launch what would be the first major national auto strike since 1976.

Workers confront an extraordinary situation as the contracts expire. The organization that supposedly represents them, the United Auto Workers (UAW), has been exposed as a bribed tool of corporate management, with its top executives, including the president of the organization, facing potential criminal charges.

As US workers gear up for this battle, 10,000 GM workers in South Korea are engaging in the first full-scale strike in that country in 22 years. The three-day walkout affected GM assembly plants in Incheon, west of Seoul, and Changwon, 250 miles southeast of the capital, as well as GM's technical center. It follows repeated threats by GM that it will close operations because labor costs are too high.

As part of its global restructuring plan, GM closed its Gunsan assembly plant in May 2018, wiping out 2,000 production jobs and thousands more in related industries. With the support of the GM Korea branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), GM pressured the remaining workers to accept a wage and bonus freeze and increased production quotas to boost profitability.

In the current negotiations, GM is demanding an extension of the pay freeze. In a visit to Korea last month, GM's vice president for international operations said the company was "extremely disappointed" with the planned strike and would shift production to its plants in other countries to make up for lost production. He also threatened that GM would reconsider the allocation of

future models at its Korean plants.

In North America, GM workers at the giant Silao manufacturing complex in central Mexico reported Monday that local management is accelerating production and victimizing militant workers who resist. The workers say the speedup is part of GM's international strategy to increase production of the company's highly profitable pickup trucks in advance of a possible strike in the US.

The Mexican workers are being victimized because they refuse to be strikebreakers for GM. In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, one of the fired workers, Israel Cervantes, said, "We are hoping to support people in the US and to get support from there." A co-worker added that a joint struggle with US workers "would be a great strategy."

The struggles of autoworkers are taking place amidst a significant growth of social conflict and class struggle throughout the world, from the mass protests in Puerto Rico and Hong Kong, to the strike this week by 4,000 pilots at British Airways.

Workers are coming to recognize that it is not possible to fight global corporations on a limited national basis. Earlier this year, 70,000 workers who produce auto parts and electronics at *maquiladora* factories in Matamoros, Mexico, revolted against the pro-company unions, set up strike committees and launched wildcat strikes. Appealing for solidarity from American workers, the striking workers marched to the US border near Brownsville, Texas, chanting, "Gringos, wake up!"

The objective striving of workers to unify and coordinate their struggles across national borders is the most powerful antidote to the noxious nationalism and xenophobia promoted by capitalist governments, from the Trump administration in the US and its far-right counterparts in Europe to the Modi government in India and the African National Congress in South Africa.

The anger of the workers is boiling over. But the

coming struggle must be guided by a conscious international and socialist strategy.

The automakers and the wealthy investors certainly have a global strategy. They decide where to locate production based on where the unions supply them with the cheapest sources of labor and use their global operations to undermine the impact of a strike in any single country. GM, Ford, VW and Nissan are all engaged in a ruthless restructuring of their operations, closing plants and laying off tens of thousands in order to position themselves for the brutal competition to dominate shrinking markets and new technologies like electric and self-driving vehicles.

The automakers' expansion in China, India and other "emerging markets" is already drying up due to growing trade conflicts and the descent into global recession. Hundreds of thousands of autoworkers in China and India have already lost their jobs.

GM recorded profits of \$11.8 billion in 2018 and has funneled more than \$25 billion to shareholders in the form of stock buybacks and dividend payments over the last six years. But this is not enough. On Monday, Moody's downgraded Ford's credit rating to "junk" status, making it clear that Wall Street wants the automakers to continue to slash labor costs, including expanding temporary labor and gutting autoworkers' health care benefits, which *Forbes* recently denounced as "the last vestige of the quasi-socialism that dominated the US auto industry for 100 years."

Autoworkers throughout the world are connected by a global process of production. There is no such thing as an "American-made" vehicle, any more than a Mexican or Chinese one. The iconic Ford Mustang is built in Flat Rock, Michigan, with transmission parts from China, France, the UK and Mexico. Between 8 and 9 million workers are tied together in a highly complex global supply and production chain, spread across at least 62 countries.

The international integration of the labor of millions of workers all over the world gives the workers an immense advantage, if they understand how to utilize it.

To take up this fight, autoworkers in the US and internationally must break the stranglehold of the corporatist and nationalist unions by building new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees, controlled democratically by workers themselves.

The massive corruption of the UAW is not simply the product of the actions of individual executives. It is the

most grotesque expression of the transformation of the unions into instruments of corporate management. Rooted in a nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective, the unions responded to the globalization of production by collaborating with the companies in driving down the living conditions of the working class.

For decades, the UAW has peddled the lie that foreign workers are "stealing American jobs," while colluding with the corporations to slash labor costs and turn American workers into a cheap, disposable workforce. In return, the companies have handed UAW officials millions in bribes to sign and enforce pro-company labor agreements.

In every country, autoworkers confront the sabotage of the trade unions, which are based on an outmoded national perspective and the defense of the capitalist profit system. Far from uniting workers across borders who are fighting transnational corporations, the UAW, Unifor in Canada, IG Metall in Germany, the KMWU and the rest of the unions do everything they can to divide workers along national lines.

Only by freeing themselves from the paid agents of the corporations can American autoworkers forge powerful bonds with their co-workers in Canada, Mexico, Korea and around the world to fight the transnational corporations. In this struggle, the International Committee of the Fourth International will do everything in its power to assist workers in coordinating their struggles and arming them with the political perspective and revolutionary leadership necessary to abolish capitalist exploitation once and for all.



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