

US autoworkers shut down production at GM in nationwide strike

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At 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on Sunday, 49,000 autoworkers at General Motors began a nationwide strike, shutting down every one of the company's 35 plants in the United States.

The walkout is the most significant strike by American industrial workers in a generation, a testament to the determination of autoworkers to end forty years of concessions. It demonstrates the immense social power of the working class and marks an escalation of the rising international movement of the working class.

The GM strike in the US follows last week's strike by 8,000 GM workers in South Korea, where the auto giant is threatening more plant closures. It also follows a strike by transit workers in France that shut down the Paris metro, and a wave of mass protests, from the Yellow Vests in France, to workers and youth in Hong Kong, to the mass movement in Puerto Rico, to waves of strikes and protests in Sudan, Algeria and other parts of Africa.

Earlier this year, maquiladora auto parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico, rebelled against their pro-company unions, set up rank-and-file strike committees and shut down production for weeks. They marched to the US border to appeal for support from their US brothers and sisters.

Workers at Ford and Fiat Chrysler enthusiastically support the GM strikers and overwhelmingly favor joining them in an all-out strike against the US-based auto companies. Workers all over the world will take heart and be inspired by an expression of the power of the working class in the center of world capitalism.

The United Auto Workers union, thoroughly discredited among autoworkers for its role in enforcing decades of concessions and a widening corruption scandal implicating its top leadership, tried desperately to prevent a strike. The beginning of the strike comes only a day after the union ordered GM production workers to cross the picket lines of UAW janitors at plants in Michigan and Ohio.

In the end, the UAW decided it had no choice but to call a strike or risk a rank-and-file rebellion and loss of any control over the workers. Workers need to be clear that in order to prove its value to the company and federal corruption investigators, the union will work to shut down the strike as quickly as possible and impose a sellout.

"The contract expired [Saturday] and we continued to work 9 hours," a GM worker at Flint Assembly said yesterday. "I was pretty mad. And they call it for 11:59 tonight. They should have called it right then and there. And not only that, but they made us cross Aramark [janitorial] workers. They said if we didn't cross it would be a wildcat strike.

"I can't afford to lose my job. I was livid. I couldn't believe that our union allowed it and basically enforced it—made us cross their lines and go to work. A lot of us were upset."

GM publishes offer details

On Sunday afternoon, in advance of the strike, General Motors released details of its proposal to UAW negotiators in a highly unusual statement. While the supposed highlights are vague and self-serving, reading between the lines reveals the strategy for concessions which GM has been cooking up with its lackeys on the UAW bargaining committee.

GM claims that its proposal would have meant \$7 billion in new US investments and 5,400 new jobs. This, however, is a drop in the bucket when compared to the jobs bloodbath in the auto industry over the last 12 months. Since January alone, the US industry has laid off more than 20,000 autoworkers. In China and India, automakers have laid off over 200,000 and 350,000 this year, respectively.

GM took the lead with its announcement last year that it would close five North American plants and lay off 14,000 employees worldwide. As the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* warned, one of the functions of the announcement was to lay the foundation for a rotten deal combining major concessions with a face-saving agreement to "save" one or two of the facilities.

These warnings have now been effectively confirmed. According to press sources, the deal would have involved a plan to eventually reopen Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly, slated for closure in January, as a facility building next-generation electric pickup trucks. However, the plant would still be idled next year, with only vague promises to reopen it at some point during the four-year agreement.

Electric vehicles require less labor to build because they use far fewer parts than traditional gas-powered vehicles, meaning that a large portion of the jobs lost at the plant would never be restored.

The statement also declared that the proposal would have created a new battery plant in the vicinity of Lordstown Assembly, which was shuttered earlier this year. However, Lordstown itself would still be sold off to an electric vehicle start-up company.

The GM statement said nothing specific about wages and benefits, a clear sign that it expects to slash labor costs. Prior to the start of talks, GM complained that it spends far more in hourly labor costs than its foreign competitors at plants in the southern US.

In particular, GM pointed to the fact that only 6 percent of its work is performed by temporary labor, compared to 20 percent at foreign automakers' US-based facilities. A former GM executive told Wall Street investors two years ago that the company wanted half of its labor force to consist of temps.

Significantly, the press release says nothing at all about the use of temporary part-time (TPT) labor, a guilty silence that indicates massive increases.

Particularly dishonest is the claim that the company offer would "retain nationally-leading health care benefits" for autoworkers. Given the fact that autoworkers pay much less in out-of-pocket health care expenses than the national average, this carefully worded statement by no means excludes major cuts. The auto companies have pointed to health care as a major area where they are seeking to cut costs.

Autoworkers furious as UAW orders them to cross janitors' picket lines

The five plants involved in the janitors' strike are Flint Metal Center, Flint Engine Operations, Flint Assembly and Warren Tech Center, all in Michigan, and the Parma Metal Center near Cleveland, Ohio. The janitors, who work for GM contractor Aramark, are also members of the UAW.

The early morning scenes of workers in Flint, birthplace of the UAW and the site of the historic sit-down strike of 1936–37, being ordered by the union to cross the picket lines of workers at the same plants sum up the transformation of the UAW into a bribed arm of management. The sit-down strike demonstrated the immense industrial and social power of the working class when it fights in unity and solidarity. That legacy is precisely what the UAW long ago repudiated and has sought to destroy.

Autoworkers who spoke to the press were furious that the UAW is forcing them to scab on the janitors. One Flint worker was on the verge of tears going to work, according to the *Detroit Free Press*.

"They've segregated us away from GM," one of the janitors told the newspaper. "We're one union. Everything should be done together. We're supposed to be brothers and sisters."

Even as autoworkers at the five plants were being forced by the union to scab, the UAW-GM Council was holding a private meeting at 10 a.m. at the Marriott Renaissance Hotel (located in the GM-owned Renaissance Center), to be followed by a press conference.

A reporting team for the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* was barred by UAW officials from entering the premises to cover the meeting. When *Autoworker Newsletter* and *WSWS* Labor Editor Jerry White objected to this flagrant attack on freedom of the press and pointed out that the *Wall Street Journal* was allowed into the press conference, a UAW official retorted, "Freedom means that I do not have to answer any of your questions."

The union sought to avoid a strike because it is fearful that it could quickly lose control of even a limited action and unleash the strength of the working class. The UAW wanted to announce a settlement while workers were still in the factories out of concern that once workers walk out, it will not be able to get them back to work.

The union fears that a strike—especially one that forces the company to retreat—will encourage workers' militancy and undermine its corporatist policy. Along with his henchmen, UAW President Gary Jones, who is facing a looming criminal indictment on corruption charges, believes that the union officials must prove their continued usefulness to the government and the corporations if they are to plea bargain successfully.

On Saturday evening, UAW Vice President Terry Dittes sent a letter to GM local union presidents, shop chairmen, finance and other local officers announcing that the UAW would continue negotiations to reach an agreement by the deadline and that "no decisions or actions will be taken until the IEB [International Executive Board] meets at midnight and the National Council convenes at 10 am on Sunday."

In comments directed to rank-and-file workers livid over being kept in the dark for weeks about the status of the negotiations, or even what demands the UAW is putting forward, Dittes said that "some progress had been made." He went on to say, however, that "significant differences between the parties remain on wages, healthcare benefits, temporary employees, job security and profit sharing."

The fact is that the UAW and the corporations reached an agreement long ago and the "negotiations" are nothing more than strategy sessions to decide the best way to ram the deal through in the face of mass opposition among the workers. Even if one were to take Dittes' comments at face

value, it means the UAW is forcing workers to remain on the job under conditions where GM has not moved an iota from its demands.

The UAW International Executive Board, which is made up of President Gary Jones, Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry, vice presidents Terry Dittes (GM), Rory Gamble (Ford) and Cindy Estrada (FCA), and nine regional directors, met at midnight Saturday. The same body held a contentious meeting Friday where it demonstrated the union's contempt for workers by voting to keep Jones in power, even though he has now been implicated in a scheme in which UAW officials embezzled more than \$1 million in union money for golf outings, luxury villas, champagne and other luxuries.

Workers must oppose any attempt by the UAW to end the strike without meeting their demands to reverse the wage and benefit cuts of the past four decades, reopen the closed plants and end the multi-tier system and use of temporary and part-time workers by bringing all workers up to full scale. A three-day walkout at GM and six-hour strike at Chrysler in 2007 were followed by the introduction of the hated two-tier wage system.

Workers are determined to fight GM, which has made \$35 billion in profits in just the last three years, while spending more than \$10 billion on stock buybacks for its wealthy shareholders since 2015.

The same is true for Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers. On Friday, the UAW extended the contracts with the other automakers in order to divide autoworkers, even as the Big Three companies collaborate to impose further concessions. Union stewards and team leaders spread throughout the plants to tell workers they should not walk out.

A Fiat Chrysler worker at the Sterling Heights Assembly plant (SHAP) told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, "A lot has been taken away from us. If we all got up, right now and walked out, the companies would lose millions in the first hour of the strike. The people of the United States should shut the whole country down. We're ready. Everybody together would be more powerful than the billionaires. Production is connected worldwide, and we work on the same products as workers in Canada and Mexico. That makes it an international struggle."

Workers at a rally against auto plant closures in Detroit earlier this year

To defeat the corporate-UAW conspiracy, workers must take the contract fight out of the hands of the UAW by building rank-and-file factory committees. Workers should hold meetings in the factories and on social media to elect these committees, formulate their own demands and prepare to intervene directly to countermand any decisions by the UAW that adversely affect workers and their families.

What is needed is a real fight to mobilize all 158,000 GM, Ford and FCA workers and far broader sections of the working class. This includes reaching out to GM and other autoworkers in Canada, Mexico, Korea and other countries and forging a joint struggle in defense of jobs and living standards.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* will provide further updates as this story develops.



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