

“Now it’s time to give us back what we deserve”

Striking GM workers speak from the pickets

Marcus Day

16 September 2019

Nearly 50,000 autoworkers at General Motors in the US carried out the first full day of their strike Monday, having stopped work as of 11:59 p.m. Sunday night.

The strike marks the forceful entry of a leading section of industrial workers into the global wave of class struggle. After decades in which the United Auto Workers union has blocked strikes and forced through concessions on behalf of the corporations, autoworkers are beginning to fight back, like their brothers and sisters around the world.

Campaign teams for the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* visited a number of pickets in Michigan and beyond on Monday to distribute copies of the WSWS editorial board statement US autoworkers shut down General Motors and speak with workers about the issues motivating their struggle.

GM Detroit-Hamtramck

The Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly plant, commonly known as Poletown, is currently set to idle next January. It is one of five plants in the US and Canada that General Motors slated for closure in late 2018, in order to force workers on the defensive in advance of the contract and re-shift the narrative from wage and benefit increases to “saving jobs.” As was widely expected, General Motors’ contract offer provides for reopening the plant, no doubt in exchange for concessions on temp labor and healthcare.

“The tier system sucks,” said Mike, who has worked at Detroit-Hamtramck for 15 years. “We were sold out by the union in ’07 and ’09. We were sold out. All the temps need to be made permanent.

“They take and take every contract and they never give anything back even though they are making record profits. The real question is what percentage of the profits are going to labor? They told us after the 2008 crash that we needed to take cuts, and we did. Now it’s time to give us back what we

deserve.

“One of the most important demands we have in this contract struggle is for our medical coverage. This work destroys the body. Look around. I’m hobbling, he’s hobbling—you better believe we were not hobbling before we started working here. We spend years making the company profits and then they toss us aside. They don’t care about us. It’s like we are just a number to them.

“Everything going on with the UAW corruption is just a completely embarrassing debacle. They are clearly bargaining on behalf of the company—not the workers. If they really wanted us to know what was going on, they would not give us the ‘highlights’ of the contracts, they would tell us what changed, what they are trying to take away. Years and years they keep taking from us and the union isn’t ever telling us the truth. I hear they are getting cuts of the profits [the UAW owns stock in GM] and I’m thinking you have got to be kidding me; is that not the definition of a conflict of interest?”

Betty has worked at Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly for 12 years. She derided the information blackout enforced by the UAW and the media heading into the strike. “We have gone into this strike with no communication in the plant. We had no idea what’s being brought to the table until General Motors brought it out in the news. Usually there are rumors going around, but there has been nothing.

“This is my second strike,” she continued. “I was here in 2007, but I was a temp back then and I got fired and then rehired. The company needs to share the profits. The temps need to get to full rate and we should not have to pay for our healthcare.”

On Sunday, many workers reacted angrily when the UAW insisted that they cross the picket lines of striking janitorial workers employed by Aramark, who are also UAW members and who walked out early Sunday morning. “I work in the paint department, so I don’t usually see the Aramark workers,” Betty said, “but if I had to come in when they were on strike, I wouldn’t have crossed their picket line.”

An in-progression worker, with eight years at the Poletown plant and still not yet up to full pay, said, “The company has made more than they ever had, and we want some of that.”

Asked what they would say to GM workers in South Korea who had gone on strike last week, the worker answered, “Want more. Believe you’re worth more. [Because of our experience with the UAW] I would never tell them to unionize—I would say ‘Know what you’re worth.’”

A retired worker with 34 years, walking the picket line, added, “The *big* national strike was in 1970 when my dad was out at Fleetwood. This strike is about wages and benefits. GM are liars. We have to show them we deserve decent wages for both active workers and retirees. Retirees haven’t even gotten a Christmas bonus in years.”

GM Fort Wayne, Indiana

A striking worker at the General Motors plant in Fort Wayne, Indiana told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that he agreed with the WWSWS editorial board statement calling for workers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UAW: “It’s a very powerful article and it makes a lot of sense. We as workers want a fair show for all working people, not just ourselves.

“The last thing we need is the government or a third-party arbitrator to make our decision. We just want what we deserve. We should be equal. Yes, seniority is important, but this temporary worker s**t has got to go. [It should be] 90 days and you’re automatically hired.

The worker referred bitterly to the immense inequality between workers and GM executives. “How can someone making \$22 million [GM CEO Mary Barra] not understand that us the people are responsible for her wealth? \$11 thousand an hour is ludicrous! I could live comfortably for 10 years [with] the salary she, and other CEOs make in one month. One month...it’ll take me more like 15 to 20 years to make \$1 million. That’s sickening. We just want to be able to take care of our families and be able to retire with \$1 to \$2 million in our retirement.”

GM Romulus, Michigan

“Now what they’ve done with second and third tier worker it’s ridiculous!” one worker at Romulus Engine Plant said. “No one can live off that not at all.”

“There’s hundreds of temps in here that have part-time jobs. Hell, back in the 70s and 80s they never had tiers.”

Expressing distrust in the UAW—whose current and former presidents, Gary Jones and Dennis Williams, are both under investigation for corruption and bribery—he continued, “I don’t know who is truly representing us right now. It doesn’t make it very easy for us to negotiate.

Autoworkers in Canada call for support for GM strike in US

The strike by GM workers in the US is being followed with great interest and excitement by workers internationally. Several autoworkers in Canada wrote in to the WWSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* Monday to express their support for the strike.

A worker at Fiat Chrysler Brampton, Ontario, assembly plant said, “I say STAY STRONG to ALL UAW WORKERS who are now out on strike IN SUPPORT OF THEIR JOBS and THEIR DIGNITY!

“As an autoworker in Canada their struggle is being watched closely by all Canadian workers, to all UAW WORKERS your courage and determination have made me proud to be an autoworker again. Strength in numbers, together is stronger than, STAY STRONG.”

In Oshawa, Ontario, GM is in the process of winding down production at its historic assembly plant, which opened over a century ago and once employed over 20,000 workers. The layoffs at GM Oshawa are having a domino effect throughout the nearby auto parts industry, with thousands more workers losing their jobs.

One of these workers wrote to the WWSWS Monday and said, “Dear UAW workers, I work for a feeder [supplier] plant in Oshawa Ontario Canada. I will soon be unemployed, thanks to Mary Barra.

“Our four years [of the contract] aren’t up till Sept 2020, but due to corporate greed GM, we will have no jobs. I hope you take them for what you can get. GM can’t be trusted their word means nothing. Wishing You The Best Of Luck!!!”



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