

As walkout leads to layoffs across North America

Counting on UAW to sabotage strike, GM not budging on concession demands

Jerry White
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Officials from the United Auto Workers have been hunkered down late into the night with General Motors executives at the company's downtown Detroit headquarters discussing how to beat back the resistance of striking workers and push through the automaker's demands for sweeping concessions.

The nationwide strike by 48,000 GM workers, now in its ninth day, has closed the automaker's assembly and transmission operations and replacement parts distribution to car dealerships. It has already led to slowdowns and layoffs at assembly plants and parts suppliers across the US, Canada and Mexico.

On Monday, GM told more than 1,200 workers in Canada and the US that they were being temporarily laid off. This includes 525 production workers who are members of the International Union of Electrical Workers at the DMAX engine facility in the Dayton suburb of Moraine, Ohio. The factory is a joint venture between GM and Japan-based Izuzu Diesel Services, which produces diesel engines for GM's highly profitable Sierra and Chevrolet Silverado pickup trucks.

Seven hundred layoffs also hit GM's St. Catharines, Ontario, powertrain plant, following the layoff of an estimated 4,500 workers in Canada Friday at GM's Oshawa Assembly plants and various suppliers. Industry analysts say the vast majority of GM's North American supplier plants will have to adjust production. Citigroup, in a note to investors last week, said Canadian-based Magna, American Axle, Lear and Aptiv are suppliers that will be most affected by the strike.

GM has also laid off workers at its transmission plant in Silao, Mexico. Workers at the adjacent assembly plant, have heroically defied firings and threats by GM and the company-controlled union and refused to increase production of Silverado and Sierra pickups during the strike.

Although layoffs are rolling through the North American production and supply chain, the UAW has refused to call

out the more than 100,000 Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers who want to join the strike. The walkout "should include Chrysler and Ford," a GM worker wrote in a comment to the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter, "Isn't this supposed to be the united autoworkers? Whatever is settled with us, they will get as well."

"The UAW should take all 3 out on strike," another autoworker wrote. "And if the government threatens to intervene, they should march on Washington and Wall Street. Those parasitic bean counters should get a real job. Maybe then they would have a better appreciation for a living wage in manufacturing."

The strike has exposed the class chasm between autoworkers and the UAW. The UAW has isolated the strikers and hopes to starve them into submission with \$250 a week in strike benefits. The UAW has done nothing to oppose the company's cutoff of health care benefits, organized no mass picketing or demonstrations against GM's strikebreaking operations or the injunctions and arrests of picketers in Tennessee and other states.

The media and the various Democratic Party presidential candidates coming to the picket lines for photo ops are promoting the fiction that the UAW is leading a historic struggle against GM. In reality, the UAW has colluded with the automakers for more than four decades to suppress strikes, systematically lower labor costs and boost corporate profits. In return, the automakers have handed the UAW billions in "legal" and illegal bribes, funneled through joint training programs and other corporatist schemes.

All of the issues workers are fighting—a 50 percent cut in real income since 1979, the divisive two-tier wage and benefit system, the proliferation of temporary labor, and factory closures—were agreed to by the UAW, including during the 2009 industry restructuring by the Democratic Obama administration.

Some media reports have claimed that the UAW and GM are close to an agreement. That is not because GM has given

any ground. On the contrary, the company is pressing ahead with its demands to gut health care and vastly expand the number of low-wage and disposable temp workers.

Citing UAW officials “familiar with the talks,” the *Detroit Free Press* reported, “There are five to six key sticking points in negotiations.” But these “sticking points” turn out to be everything autoworkers are fighting to stop.

Referring to GM’s plan to supposedly “save” the Lordstown, Ohio plant by producing battery cells nearby and selling a portion of the factory to electric truck startup Workhorse, the *Free Press* writes, “Some close to the talks said the battery cell manufacturer could be a joint-venture and offer a separate UAW contract for workers, likely at a lower pay rate than the GM contract. This is problematic... because in a decade or so, if battery cells replace traditional engines, gone are those higher-paying UAW jobs, replaced by the lower-paid jobs in the separate contract.”

This confirms a Bloomberg News report, which said, “GM and an as-yet-unnamed battery supplier for its next-generation electric vehicles would offer wages similar to what the automaker pays non-assembly workers who top out at \$17 an hour, according to people familiar with the proposal. Senior-level plant staff make \$30 an hour.”

GM has also not budged on its demand to expand the number of temporary workers who can labor for years without being rolled over to full-time positions. It also refuses to shorten the eight-year “in-progression” period the UAW agreed to in 2015, before lower-paid second-tier workers can earn top wages.

The UAW does not oppose these demands. It has already agreed to the expansion of low-paid contract workers at the Orion, Detroit-Hamtramck and Lordstown assembly plants, as well as at the Brownstown battery factory.

In reality, there are no “negotiations.” The only thing that concerns the UAW and GM executives is how to ram further attacks past a determined workforce, which already looks at the UAW as bribed agents of the company. The same *Free Press* article notes that UAW officials are fearful that calling off the strike before GM workers ratify a deal could lead to a rank-and-file rebellion far worse than the 2015 rejection of the UAW-backed Fiat Chrysler deal.

Although the UAW-GM Council voted on September 15, when it called the strike, to keep workers out until the council of local union officials voted to end the walkout, “two UAW local leaders who are on that council told the *Free Press* it is likely that even after that council vote, workers could remain on strike until membership ratification.”

If it feels it cannot immediately shut the strike down after announcing a deal, “the UAW leaders can expedite the ratification process beyond the typical two weeks it takes

under normal circumstances,” Marick Masters, business professor at Wayne State University told the *Free Press*.

In other words, the UAW is preparing a redux of its campaign of lies, intimidation and rigged votes based on bogus “highlights” that workers have no time to study.

If this struggle is left in the hands of the UAW bribe-takers, it will be defeated like countless other struggles. That is why workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file strike and factory committees to spread the strike throughout the entire auto and auto parts industry, mobilize far broader sections of workers and young people, and unify with autoworkers around the world.

“We should have built rank-and-file committees long ago and stood up for ourselves,” Linda, a striking GM worker at the Flint Assembly Plant, told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “To say the UAW is ‘bargaining’ for us when they are taking bribes is fraudulent. These UAW officials should be sent back into the plants to work as temps.

“Right now, the UAW is being tight-lipped and keeping us in the dark. We don’t even know what demands we’re striking for. Michigan Governor Whitmer and the mayor of Flint came to our picket lines, but it was like the Macy’s Day Parade with nothing serious said.”

Referring to the stand taken by the Mexican GM workers, Linda said, “What they are doing is amazing. I wish we could all come together and everybody would stick together. The Mexican workers are sticking up for us, and we should stick up for them.”

A veteran GM worker at the Fort Wayne, Indiana assembly plant said workers on his picket line wanted a real fight but were concerned that the strike was “just another orchestrated show,” which would be followed by the UAW trying to “sell the agreement through fear of losing your jobs to scabs.”

Speaking about the Silao workers who build the same pickups as the Ft. Wayne workers, he said, “I am very proud for them standing up and being courageous. It has to be very difficult. Workers in the US should be looking at that example. It would be a huge signal to the corporations that workers are banding together across borders. The working class was never given anything; we had to fight for it.”



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