

More layoffs at parts plants as GM, UAW strategize how to defeat strike

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More parts suppliers announced furloughs today as the strike at General Motors continues into its second week.

Hundreds of workers have been furloughed at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan and at Android Industries plants that supply GM assembly plants in Bowling Green, Kentucky; Arlington, Texas and Flint, Michigan.

There have been 4,600 layoffs in Canada alone due to the strike, according to the *Financial Post*, a demonstration of the global integration of the auto industry's supply chains. This includes more than 2,000 workers at the Oshawa Assembly plant on Ontario, which relies on parts produced in the United States. The plant was one of five North American facilities slated for closure by GM last year. Layoffs have also occurred at GM's transmission plant in central Mexican city of Silao.

The UAW is continuing its total information blackout on the contract talks. According to the *Detroit News*, GM and UAW negotiators have been continuing talks "with no sense of urgency," with negotiators ending discussions at 8 p.m. most days. The newspaper argued that the information blackout was a "good sign"—"[n]egotiating publicly would mean that one side needs to garner public support against the other," it said.

In fact, what is taking place are not "negotiations" between adversarial parties but strategy sessions between GM and its UAW agents, many of whom, including union president Gary Jones, face federal bribery and corruption charges. The focus of the discussions are over how to force through major concessions, including increased use of temps, the maintenance of the hated tier system and greater out-of-pocket health care costs.

If the negotiators are not apparently in any hurry to reach a deal to end the strike, it is because they understand that any attempt to shut down the strike could backfire and spark a rebellion by autoworkers. There are reportedly deep divisions within the UAW over how to proceed, with one faction arguing that the union will not be able to send workers back before voting on a contract, as they did after the 8-hour strike at parts supplier Faurecia in June. In the meantime, they can rely on the UAW's \$250 per week strike pay to wear down workers and starve them into submission.

This underscores the need for the building of rank-and-file strike committees to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the UAW bribe-takers, call out Ford and Fiat workers in a common strike and unify with workers in Canada, Mexico and internationally against the transnational corporations.

To the extent that the UAW is engaged in genuine bargaining, it is over how to preserve the institutional interests of the UAW apparatus. A central preoccupation of the UAW is how to maintain a flow of dues-income in the face of disruption caused by emerging technologies such as electric and autonomous vehicles.

This was demonstrated by a UAW white paper on electric vehicles which was released earlier this year. According to the study, electric vehicles (EVs) will become price competitive with traditional vehicles in less than a decade and could account for more than half of global auto sales by 2040. Because of the simpler design of electric vehicle powertrains, which use less parts than traditional combustion engines, electric cars will require approximately 30 percent less labor to produce.

The document all but accepts as inevitable that the transition to electric vehicles will result in massive job

losses. The UAW response is a combination of national protectionism and corporatism, in order to ensure that those jobs that are left stay in the United States and under the purview of the UAW, no matter how low the pay.

Their concern is that EV's will result in work being shifted to "employers with a poor history of labor relations"—that is, that do not contract out the UAW as an industrial police force—"or companies that are more likely to import components."

The study sounds the alarm that the United States is falling behind China in the electric vehicle market. It demands that the US government treat advanced vehicle technology as "a strategic sector to be protected and built in the US."

In plain language, the union supports trade war measures aimed at securing the dominance of the American auto industry at the expense of its Chinese, Japanese and European rivals. Such measures have already been implemented or threatened by the Trump administration, which has threatened to impose tariffs on auto imports on "national security grounds."

Such protectionist measures have nothing to do with defending American autoworkers. The UAW has promoted the same toxic nationalism for decades, imposing concession after concession in the name of defending "American jobs" while colluding with the auto bosses in the destruction of 600,000 Big Three jobs. The union's demand to declare electric vehicles a "strategic" asset would also invite the government to place autoworkers under state discipline and ban future strikes on "national security" grounds.

What the UAW's strategy means in practice was demonstrated in the GM's contract offer. The deal provided for the construction of a new battery plant near the now-closed Lordstown Assembly Plant in northeast Ohio.

But in exchange, workers at the plant, who would work under a separate contract from the rest of UAW members at GM, would earn near-poverty level wages which top out at \$17 per hour. This is roughly the current *starting* wage for a second-tier worker in GM's assembly plants.

The deal was not rejected because the UAW is opposed to poverty wages. On the contrary, the blueprint for this scheme was already laid out last year at Orion Assembly Plant, which produces the all-

electric Chevy Bolt. In a Memorandum of Understanding signed by union VP Cindy Estrada, the UAW agreed to allow GM to replace 150 regular employees with contractors from GM Subsystems, a wholly owned subsidiary of GM. The UAW pointed to Orion as a model for electric vehicle production in its white paper. The GM subsystems workers—who pay dues to the UAW—will receive lower pay and benefits and can be dispensed with anytime there is a downturn in sales.

GM has also offered to extend the life of the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, which is scheduled to close in January, by building new electric pickup trucks there based on the similar agreement of UAW-backed wage and benefit concessions.

The way forward for the GM strike is not the protectionism of the UAW or by swallowing its endless demands for concessions but the mobilization of the support that American autoworkers have from their brothers and sisters throughout the US and internationally. This has already been demonstrated by statements of support from Indian Maruti Suzuki workers and by the courageous stand taken by Mexican GM workers to refuse any increase in production during the strike.



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