

GM restores health care to strikers in maneuver to smooth path for UAW sellout

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GM announced that it would restore shut-off healthcare benefits to 48,000 striking workers in the United States in an effort to smooth the way for the United Auto Workers union to end the strike and impose the company's dictates.

The company cut off healthcare shortly after the strike began on September 16, after the United Auto Workers had assured workers that it had reached an agreement for GM to continue coverage through the end of the month.

The auto giant's vindictive decision to cut off healthcare benefits was a shot across the bow against autoworkers, meant to demonstrate that the company had no intention of relenting in its demands for cuts to its hourly labor costs. It was also intended to pressure the UAW to end the strike as quickly as possible, forcing the union to pay workers' health benefits from the strike fund, which the apparatus uses as a slush fund to finance their bloated six-figure salaries.

GM's reversal is a tactical maneuver. Media commentators feared its cutoff of healthcare would backfire, with the *Detroit Free Press* likening it to "pouring gas on the fire," and only enrage workers and harden their resolve.

By reinstating healthcare, GM hopes to shift the narrative towards notions of union-management "partnership" and facilitate an end to the strike. "Throughout this negotiation, GM has said that our number one focus was on the well-being for our employees," GM's VP for labor relations Scott Sandefur declared, with consummate hypocrisy. "That remains the case today."

It is entirely possible that the move was also aimed at relieving financial pressure on the union bureaucracy. The auto companies have subsidized the UAW for decades, largely through billions in joint training fund transfers to the union, to make up the massive loss of dues income, in exchange for the UAW's collusion in the destruction of workers' jobs and living standards.

While there have been conflicting stories over the last 24 hours about the likelihood of imminent settlement, nothing is certain. The UAW has continued a total information blackout, keeping workers in the dark about what the UAW has already agreed to. On Wednesday, UAW VP for General

Motors Terry Dittes released another "update" on the progress of talks. Like all previous updates, it contained no details at all about what the UAW is discussing with the company.

The letter did state that "All unsettled proposals are now at the main table and have been presented to General Motors," and that negotiations at the main table "will continue until negotiations are complete." Many press outlets interpreted this statement as suggesting that a tentative agreement is imminent, perhaps as early as the weekend. "The intensification of talks to around-the-clock bargaining and at the main table should mean that they're in striking distance of reaching an agreement," industry analyst Kristin Dziczek said.

Investors responded on Wall Street by sending General Motors stock up 1.5 percent on Thursday. This is because they understand that any deal with the UAW will include all of the company's demands, including increased use of temps and out-of-pocket healthcare expenses. Wall Street knows very well that what is taking place are not "negotiations" between two adversarial parties, but strategy sessions over how to force through the cuts which GM's investors are demanding.

However, these reports were contradicted yesterday evening by a report in the *Detroit Free Press*, which suggested that a deal might not be reached for another week and that the strike would likely continue well into October. The UAW may also choose not to send workers back to work immediately after a tentative agreement has been reached, as it did in the Faurecia auto parts strike in June. Not only do union officials fear that a contract would be defeated by irate workers sent back to work without seeing the contract, they also fear that workers could defy a union back-to-work order like West Virginia teachers did last year, shattering the already worn authority of the UAW.

Instead, according to the *Free Press*, the union may keep workers out during the ratification process, but force them to vote in an expedited process lasting only a week after the deal is announced.

The corporate media expressed concern that workers will vote on principle to reject any contract sent to them by the UAW. “The tentative agreement they negotiate will have to be good enough to sell itself,” Wayne State University professor Marick Masters told the *Free Press*. “The (UAW) leadership will not be able to sell an agreement that the membership will ratify, because they will not have confidence in the leaders,” he said, because the federal corruption probe has exposed the UAW as a criminal syndicate.

One striker at GM’s Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant expressed the hatred for the UAW felt by broad layers of autoworkers. “Specific individuals in our international union are being federally indicted, yet they are able to keep their positions. They should be summarily terminated. We’re talking about workers’ livelihoods, their ability to feed their families, and these guys are living high on the hog.

“These officials are supposed to be our representatives, but they act like overlords.

“I want to know specific details about what is going on. We want to know before the contract is signed.”

Insofar as they cannot shut down the strike immediately without provoking an outright rebellion, GM and the UAW’s strategy is to wear down the strikers with poverty level strike pay of \$250 per week. The latter will not even begin to be paid out until the 15th day of the strike. Twelve days since the strike began, workers have not received a single cent from the UAW’s \$800 million strike fund.

“We’ve got a union president and other officials living in million-dollar homes, tens of thousands of dollars found in their garages,” the Detroit-Hamtramck worker said. “And we get \$250 a week! What’s that supposed to do? Pay for your parking and gas? I could get a better wage working at McDonald’s four days a week. Instead of the UAW being called the International Union, it should be called the syndicate.

“All I’m asking for is that our leaders be held to the same account,” he continued. “These are my thoughts ... [but] if you were to talk to the people who actually walk these lines, you’d be surprised with the number of people who agree with that.”

The UAW is deliberately isolating the strike by limiting it to GM while leaving Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers on the job. This has given the other two US automakers free rein to ramp up production in order to stockpile vehicles, in case their own workers join the strike.

According to multiple reports by autoworkers to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, Fiat Chrysler is forcing workers, in at least some of its plants, including its Toledo North Assembly Plant in Ohio, to work 10-hour shifts, between 6 and 7 days per week, to stockpile Jeeps.

By doing this, the UAW is functioning as a strikebreaker, helping the auto companies pick off one section of workers at a time. That underscores the need for workers to build rank-and-file factory and strike committees, which will act independently of the UAW, to unite GM, Ford, Fiat Chrysler and all auto and auto parts workers in an industry-wide strike. At the same time, US autoworkers can only counter the global strategy of the auto giants by reaching out to autoworkers internationally, coordinating their struggle with striking GM workers in South Korea and around the world.

The UAW has deliberately blacked out the courageous stand taken by GM workers in Mexico, who have been fired for refusing to accept increases in production during the strike in the United States. This is in keeping with the UAW’s longstanding American nationalism, which it has used to divide GM’s global workforce and justify cuts in the name of saving “American” jobs.

“Of course, the workers in Mexico should be defended,” the GM worker said. “The reason they open these factories in Mexico and other places is because safety protocols don’t really apply there and GM is putting the people in danger there. They pay them less money and fire them at the drop of a hat. And then, GM says, it will be even more cost-effective to go to Thailand or the Philippines or someplace else they can get it cheaper.

“The issue is, who do we look to? Do we look to our officials? Our government? Unless we have a united front with workers all over, we can’t be effective. I say to the workers in Mexico, keep fighting.”



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