

“The UAW is allowing GM to take us back to before the sit-down strikes”

Striking GM workers on picket line discuss what is at stake in their battle

Our reporters
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Striking GM workers and other autoworkers who joined them on picket lines across the US spoke to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* about the significance of the strike, now the longest at GM since the 67-day walkout in 1970.

Flint, Michigan

Sit-Downers Memorial Park, commemorating the 1936-37 struggle that led to the founding of the UAW as a mass industrial union, is directly across the street from the GM Flint Truck Assembly complex. Throughout Saturday, pickets crossed the street and visited the park. Like many strikers, Christina and Julie told us they had never been to the memorial, but knew of the struggles and sacrifices that built the union.

More than 82 years ago, the Flint sit-down strike, which lasted 44 days, forced GM, then the largest industrial enterprise on the planet, to recognize the UAW. Several months ago, retirees marched in front of the memorial to demand the removal of Norwood Jewell’s name from the plaque after the UAW vice president and former regional director pleaded guilty to taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes from Fiat Chrysler.

The present strike is reviving memories and interest in the history of “the strike heard around the world,” as the sit-down strike was called. On the picket line, Brenda, a veteran autoworker of 46 years told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “The conditions that exist today would make the sit-downers roll over in their graves! I came up from Arkansas to work in the plant. It used to be you could make a decent living working for General Motors, but that all went away. The union allowed the tier system, concessions, layoffs and plant closings. The temps, for instance, barely get by. They can’t even buy a car or pay for car insurance. I want the younger people to have a good life. What the union is doing is allowing GM to take us back to before the sit-down strikes.”

Don, another “legacy” worker, reminded his co-workers on the picket line, “The whole country, coast-to-coast, should have walked out when Reagan fired the air traffic controllers (PATCO) in 1981. That’s what opened the door to all of this. It was a turning point. Unfortunately, we’re used to the isolation today,” he said, acknowledging that GM workers would be in a far stronger position if Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers joined the strike.

“I have a grandfather and a great uncle who were in the sit-down strike. They’re spinning in their graves seeing all the headlines about the

corruption scandal.” Commenting on the denunciation of socialism by Solidarity House he said, “it’s because they want to keep their money.”

Tony, another Truck Assembly worker explained, “Trades certification was taken away by GM and former trades workers are sent to assembly while outside contractors are hired in at less pay. Parts come in from outside companies, they are minimum wage people. I’m too old for assembly production. My legs didn’t work on my first day. The repetition of working on the line is brutal, it’s not an easy job.”

Workers are angry that their first meager \$250 strike paycheck won’t be available until Tuesday. A tier-one worker with many years of seniority remarked, “It’s been really, really quiet this time around. We used to hear some demands in contracts before. Now we don’t hear anything. A lot of our strike is about getting the temp workers to be full-time. Temp workers work for six-seven years. There’s no seniority. They should be immediately full-time workers. I heard the union officials are making \$3,000 a week! They have their own union outside of us. They (UAW officials) have double pensions. We might get pensions and the new hires get nothing. Companies are selling off pensions to the banks which buy them, and the banks go bankrupt and they get bailed out. It’s a scheme!”

“My daughter works for CCA (GM’s Customer Care and Aftersales division) as a group leader at top pay but only makes \$15/hour. We used to be the top paid workers. People from the South and around the world came here. Auto used to be everything; now we’re low paid compared to before. Warren and Sanders came to Michigan to talk to us, but the Democrats bailed out Wall Street. We didn’t get bailed out.”

WSWS reporters also spoke to workers picketing the CCA facility in nearby Burton. Nexteer workers from Saginaw also joined the line. “We work at a former Delphi plant,” one Nexteer worker said. “We’re laid off during the strike. We’re shut down. There’s only a few workers in our plant. We should be out on strike too—we make the parts for them. We make parts for BMW, Toyota, not just Big Three—they all use the same parts. The union should be calling us all out.

“The conditions of the workers from Silao, Mexico are so bad. They get paid worse than us and we don’t make enough any more. I was a team leader at Delphi and made \$20/hour. My son makes \$14 and he hired in after me. We all do the same job, but because of hire dates they get paid less and less. Some work 10 years at \$15 an hour. My dad worked for GM for 44 years and he made more when he retired in 1999 than I make today.”

A younger Nexteer worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “I work on the doors, these ovens are over 1,900 degrees with possibility of fires all the time. When the machine is jammed, I have to jump in with an oil pit. I get paid less for doing a dangerous job.

“It’s a bad, dangerous and dirty place to work. Our last strike [a one-day strike in 2015] was a joke. They lay off seniority workers and hire slave-wage workers. They outsource work to other companies for cheap labor, like Bosch.”

Referring to the \$800 million UAW strike fund, he said, “From the last contract, we pay an extra half hour of work a month in dues that was supposed to go to the strike fund over the last three years. They have plenty of money to pay workers. It’s our money not theirs. If they pay some of that \$800 million, we could be out longer, but now people are thinking about going back to work because we’re going bankrupt as workers.”

Mary, a striker from CCA, said, “They (UAW) are in bed with management. Our official was supposed to come out and picket today and he didn’t. There’s a strike fund, but we’re buying tents and heaters, not the union.”

When the workers looked at the graph from the *Autoworker Newsletter* showing how the strike fund has been used as a slush fund to pay the bloated salaries of UAW officials and their families, not to help strikers, Mary and another CCA worker declared, “WOW! I can’t believe they have 18 typists on the payroll. They are all abusing the system using our money to have a great time. Our local officials used to be like us and now they are privileged. They’re waiting for GM to pave the way for worse contracts. It’s going to hit workers from other industries like those workers from Nexteer who came to support us. I told my buddy in UM hospital, we all need to unite and do something.”

Orion Township, Michigan

Sandy, a tier-two worker at Orion assembly, said she had worked at the plant, just north of Detroit, since 2008 and is still a tier-two worker. She noted that the UAW had agreed to special concessionary terms at Orion, stipulating that 40 percent of the workforce would be lower-paid workers making half or even less than half of higher seniority “legacy” workers.

Last year, then UAW Vice President for GM Cindy Estrada (now leading the UAW bargaining team at Fiat Chrysler) and the Local 5960 leadership signed a sweetheart deal allowing the company to expand the number of workers employed by GM Subsystems, a wholly owned subsidiary, in order to replace some regular GM employees in the material department making full pay and benefits.

The treachery of the UAW at Orion is the model for the deal it is preparing with GM to supposedly “save” the Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant and locate a battery plant near the now shuttered Lordstown, Ohio factory.

“I think it is BS,” Sandy said of the so-called Competitive Operating Agreement. “I might understand it when GM was going under, but we were under the assumption that we would get back to where we should be.

“Not only are they going back on that, but now they are trying to take more. Mary Barra makes \$22 million a year, that is \$11,000 an hour! Asking us to sacrifice more is wrong.”

“Now it is our time,” she said, emphasizing her determination to fight. “We want a date for the temps to be hired full time. We want them to have hope.”

“I am proud to be part of this,” Sandy said. “People are making half of what I make and are earning way less benefits. GM is not doing what they said. They hired these workers, giving them the idea they had a foot in the door, but some have been there now eight years making \$15 an hour.”

Detroit-Hamtramck

At the picket line in front of GM’s only factory left standing within the city of Detroit, UAW Local 22 officials told workers that any day they missed picket line duty would result in a \$50 loss out of their paltry \$250 a week strike benefits, which will not be paid out until Tuesday. Local officials also tried to stop workers from reading the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, but many ignored them, saying they had the right to think for themselves.

Several senior workers on the line had worked at GM’s Fleetwood and Cadillac plants in the southwest of Detroit, which closed in 1987, and remembered the *Bulletin* newspaper, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*. “You socialists have been fighting for us for a long time,” said one of the veterans. Another said the two former plants employed nearly 8,000 workers between them and were replaced by the Detroit-Hamtramck plant that never employed more than 3,800 workers.

“\$250 in strike pay is not enough,” said one younger worker with nearly four years at the plant. “\$750 a week would be great,” he said, referring to tripling the strike pay, which the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* has called for. “If people are running out of money, it’s a slick way to make us go back to work with whatever we can get. That’s why they dangle the ‘signing bonuses’ at us.

“There are a lot of temps in here and they don’t get profit sharing. The full-time guys pool some of our profit-sharing checks to give the temps money. They have this contract company called LOC Syncreon, and they have a separate UAW contract from us. No one should be living paycheck to paycheck when you’re building cars that sell for \$50,000-60,000 each. These workers will never have a pension to fall back on. These millennials are being sucked dry—they are going to grow up with no savings and will be homeless.”

He continued, “When I first heard about the Mexican GM workers being fired for supporting us, I told the other guys on the line, ‘We have to do something to heal this. They’re sticking their necks out for us. They have families too and GM is paying them \$2-\$3 an hour to build the same cars as us.’

“I am totally with the workers in the Silao plant. This is a big thing. We have to demand that they get reinstated before we go back to work.”

Lansing, Michigan

Jeff, a GM worker in Lansing, gave a message to Mexican workers: “Stay together and organize as best as you can. Stay true to your feelings. You are working for the whole. Your strength is in numbers. It’s hard here, too, because the union works for the company. To start your own committees takes balls. The union isn’t going to like that if you’re organizing outside of their circle.” He continued, “I don’t blame the workers in Mexico, it’s the company doing it because the labor is so cheap. It’s everywhere that workers are facing exploitation.”

Spring Hill, Tennessee

At the picket line one worker said he was three years into an “eight-year trek toward topping out” with full pay. He expressed his solidarity with the fired Silao workers, saying, “We thank you for your sacrifice.” A Fiat Chrysler worker was also on the picket line. “If the Chrysler and Ford

[workers] struck with the GM workers it would have a large impact,” she said.

Martinsburg, West Virginia

WSWS reporters also spoke to pickets at a GM parts distribution center in Martinsburg, which is located in West Virginia’s eastern panhandle between Virginia and Maryland. The GM facility has seen a major loss of jobs since the company’s 2009 bankruptcy. “Today we have 88 people working here,” a striking worker with over 20 years told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “Ten years ago, we had at least 2,000.”

Speaking on the concessions handed over by the UAW during President Obama’s restructuring of GM and Chrysler, he said, “We gave back our COLA and make \$1.50 less now than we did in 2009. GM wants to have us pay 13 percent out-of-pocket costs for healthcare.”

As with other autoworkers throughout the United States, the pickets in Martinsburg supported their Mexican co-workers. “I’m happy they [are fighting against the speedup]” said one worker. “I heard about an auto company facility in Alabama where the five-year plan was to increase speedup on workers as a way to cause injuries and get rid of older, higher-paid workers. Once they were out, they would then hire temps,” he said.

“We don’t want to see any temp workers. Some spend eight to 10 years as a temp. That is ridiculous. They get three days off a year, and it is unpaid. It shouldn’t be like that. It should be equal pay for equal work.”

The striking workers noted many other workers, including teachers who struck across the state in 2018 and earlier this year, along with other auto and retail workers, had come out to support their picket lines, bringing food and other items. Mack Truck workers, whose three-year UAW contract is expiring on October 1, have also joined the GM pickets.



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