GM workers livid over $250 strike pay, as UAW uses economic pressure to break resistance to concessions

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On Thursday, October 3 at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter *is hosting an online meeting to discuss the strategy and perspective needed to win the strike. To participate, visit* ***wsws.org/autocall****.*

After 15 days on strike, 48,000 General Motors workers began going to local union halls yesterday to collect their first strike checks from the United Auto Workers. Striking workers who are facing severe economic hardship were livid over the fact that they were being paid only $250 a week from the UAW, which is sitting on a strike fund worth over $800 million.

While workers have sacrificed everything to fight GM's demands for sweeping concessions, which will reshape the auto industry and class relations as a whole, the UAW's bloated staff of corrupt officials continue to receive their full salaries. This includes UAW President Gary Jones—whose home was raided by the FBI in connection with the massive corruption scandal engulfing the UAW—and Terry Dittes, who is overseeing the supposed "negotiations" with GM.

Jones is paid $260,243, or $5,004 per week, and Dittes is paid $235,873, or $4,536 per week.

"One of my friends is stressing out about losing her house," said a GM worker at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant who came to the UAW Local 22 hall Monday to collect her check. "I believe the company and the union are using economic hardships to make us give up."

"This $250 is nonsense," another worker said. "The bill collectors haven't stopped because we're on strike." A third said, "We can't make ends meet. It's just enough for a little gas and a little food. You can't pay your bills."

Another worker said she was coming to the hall because local UAW officials had not recorded her time on the picket line correctly and didn't pay her any strike benefits.

"I'm not getting paid today at all. It's very tight. Some people saved up, but others couldn't. But the worst thing is we're frustrated because we don't know what's going on. The union is keeping us out of the loop, and everything is hush-hush."

A tier-two worker said she was disgusted with both the UAW and GM. "The UAW needs to be investigated," she said, referring to the corruption scandal. "And the CEO pay," she added, referring to Mary Barra's reported $22 million salary.

Supporters of the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* said workers had to build rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the UAW. These committees, they explained, should demand the tripling of strike pay to $750 a week. The isolation of the strike imposed by the UAW must be broken by uniting with Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers.

A worker with eight years at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, who was driving out with a strike check and a bag of groceries, was shocked to learn that the UAW had siphoned off hundreds of millions of dollars from the strike fund to pay the six-digit salaries of hundreds of functionaries who do little or no actual work.

The UAW has also paid out at least $1.5 million in legal fees to defend union officials charged with corruption.

"It's hard. I'm relying on donations of food. I'm glad my kids are grown because this would be even tougher. All of my family were union guys, truck drivers, telephone workers, and my father-in-law

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worked at Cadillac before transferring to Poletown [the Detroit-Hamtramck plant].

"We are going to keep fighting. It would be a lot better if we had $750 a week. Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers should be out with us too. All the Big Three workers face the same thing; that's why they've been coming to our picket lines. But we need to be striking together."

The worker explained how important it was to overturn the two-tier system and convert temps into full-time workers. "We're all doing the same work, and we should all be paid the same wage. There are temps at our plant who have been there for years. I'm a second-tier worker, and we all should have the same pay and benefits."

She also said it was amazing that GM workers in Korea had struck and that GM workers in Mexico and Brazil had expressed their support for strikers in the US.

"We're the ones who are making things happen, and we have to get more. It's amazing that workers all over the world are supporting us. We're all brothers and sisters, and we have each other's backs."

The UAW is systematically isolating GM workers and counting on the economic hardships of a long strike to undermine the resistance of workers to more concessions.

At the same time, Wall Street has signaled its willingness to back GM for as long as it takes, so long as the company does not back down from its demands to sharply increase health care costs and vastly expanding the number of temporary and contract workers.

GM is waiting the strike out and counting on the UAW to starve workers into submission. This fact was underscored in comments reported by the *Detroit Free Press* Monday morning.

"Former labor negotiator for Fiat Chrysler Automobiles Colin Lightbody suggested to the Free Press a few days ago that GM might save $500 million in future labor costs if it can wrest the kind of settlement it wants from the UAW."

The *Free Press* wrote: "That type of settlement might be unlikely, for it would entail getting workers to agree to increase what they pay for health care coverage to 15% from the current 3% and also to dramatically increase the percentage of temporary (and lower paid) workers. The UAW has rejected those increases.

"But, if GM prevails on those increases, that sort of settlement could save GM $5 an hour in labor costs, translating into some $500 million a year—enough to possibly make up for profits lost in the first two weeks of the strike."

"That's a lot of money and that's why GM is willing to hold out," Lightbody told the *Free Press*.

In fact, the UAW has not rejected any of GM's demands. In 2015, the UAW proposed to set up a "health care co-op" precisely to cut health care costs for the auto companies, but this was one of the main factors that led to the overwhelming rejection of the UAW-backed tentative agreement by Fiat Chrysler workers.

As for the expansion of low-wage temp and third-party contract workers, the UAW has already pushed "Competitive Operating Agreements" and "Super-competitive Operating Agreements" at Lordstown, Orion, Detroit-Hamtramck, Brownstown battery and other plants, which are aimed at ridding the plants of higher-paid senior workers.

If the UAW felt compelled to call the strike and has allowed it to continue this long, it is only because they fear bringing back another blatantly pro-company deal will provoke an explosion. That is why it has opted to let the strike drag out, continue to isolate it and pay starvation-level strike benefits to wear workers down.

If this strike is to be won—and it can be—workers will have to seize the initiative by forming rank-and-file committees, spreading the strike throughout the auto and auto parts industry, and unifying all workers in the US and internationally in a social movement against capitalist exploitation and social inequality.

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