“It’s like the UAW is management:” GM strikers speak out as union moves towards sellout

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14 October 2019

Reporting teams for the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* spoke to striking GM workers throughout Southeast Michigan over the weekend, as news emerged that the UAW is preparing to move towards a tentative agreement to shut down the four-week strike and enforce concessions.

John works at GM’s Warren Technical Center in suburban Detroit. “Normally the union just gives you the highlights; obviously all the good stuff. But it’s not until down the road when you need to utilize this benefit or another, and [you discover] it’s changed since then, that you find out what you’ve lost.”

“You know the contract. It’s like a dictionary. There’s no way you could go through it all. They don’t give you the low lights, you only find out about that later. I’ve been at GM for the last nine years. With all the corruption with the union, it sours us, obviously. I don’t take anything on face value. Even the news today is scripted, like with weapons of mass destruction and what I call the weapons of ‘mass distraction.’”

Reporters spoke with a recently retired skilled trades worker who joined the picket line at Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant on Saturday. He first hired in at the plant shortly after it opened in 1985 but was shifted around all over Michigan during the course of his career. He came to join the picket line to show his support to the younger generation, particularly the temporary workers, for whom he expressed immense sympathy.

When asked about the announced UAW proposal, he responded with a skeptical laugh. “My own opinion is that the union and General Motors are in agreement that this business needs to survive and that they need to try to find a way to satisfy the workers with something, but not to make it more expensive for General Motors to move more work out of state or out of the country.”

He added, “We’re talking about Korea, we’re talking about China. Cars are being made in Thailand where the minimum wage is $10 a day. I think they should make more. We can’t compete against that, but robots can.

“The trend worldwide is they are just rolling right over people. They know they can take their equipment, which is built in a modular way and they can move it all over the world.

“The UAW sure got caught again” with the corruption scandal, he said. “People that have been in the union for a while say that this is not a democracy. It seems to be controlled by a dictatorship sometimes.”

“It’s like now the union is the administrative wing of General Motors,” he added. “They’re doing management’s job in instructing us and taking the burden off of management. They’ve taken the responsibilities of the people headaches.”

When asked about how things changed since he first began working for General Motors in the 1980s, he said, “Well, you know about the temporary workers. That’s the worst thing. I try to remember the [temporary workers], because this is the new trend. And it’s bad for anybody to not have a guaranteed job or at least something that they could rely on. What’s this world coming to? There should be some humanity involved.

“The workers now don’t have it easy. They are in so much motion that their joints and backs just wear down. General Motors says, ‘Let’s get the old people out, get these youngsters in here, and they will last ten years or so.’

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“They want no complications with their workers, or they want robots. The fewer humans they have, the fewer human complications they have. So that’s the way the shop floor is, they really don’t want to deal with people. The workers they have now are in motion, and the feeling on the floor is that General Motors thinks, ‘we own you.’ For eight hours or however long in a day, you do what we say and we want you in constant motion.

“Being older too, you’re a target. They want them scared. That’s why they want younger people, because younger people don’t know [their rights].”

He spoke at length about the way in which GM, with the support of the UAW, uses strict regulations to terrorize its workforce and keep it submissive. The auto companies have done studies, he said, “and according to their statistics, manufacturing efficiency improves with strict work rules. With this sort of treatment of the workers, their efficiency is better. And we’re getting treated like dogs because we’re trying to do better for them.

“If a worker is out there, trying to do their job and they happen to get hurt, and they always find a reason that it’s the worker’s fault and they discipline them.

“You’re automatically a criminal, a safety violator, and therefore, you’re tagged continuously if you get hurt more than once. It stays in your record, and they can use that against you. GM will never erase your record about being hurt. And they will use that, if you ever get hurt to the point where you can’t work anymore, they’re going to march out their lawyers, look at your record and they’re going to say you could have done better.

“I’ve been a victim of this. I was running my tail off as an electrician, and I would lock out equipment for one station and go in and fix the machine. Well, we’re shorthanded, I’m on my own one day, I go around putting the safety locks on everything … and I missed one lock. And my manager comes by and looks at the red light, and they are looking for you to make a mistake. And they got me on that one, I missed one lock, and automatically—out the door, [suspended] for two days. That cost me money and humiliation.

“This was around the time of the bankruptcy [in 2009]. The UAW was in the process of trying to accommodate General Motors about safety, buying in to this ‘zero tolerance’ policy. They basically stood by and said, ‘It’s zero tolerance, so we have nothing to say, good luck with that. You’re a violator.’ They give you a piece of paper, you can sign it or ignore it. The UAW has bought into this zero-tolerance policy and it abandoned me on that part of the representation.”

A third-generation autoworker, also at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, said, “My feeling is that we are at a turning point. It’s not just about this strike, the whole situation is at a turning point. I don’t know if the old way of doing things will work anymore. I think we need a new strategy.”

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