

Lessons of the GM autoworkers strike

Marcus Day
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On Friday, the United Auto Workers announced that its proposed contract with General Motors had been ratified by 57 percent, ending the 40-day-long strike by roughly 46,000 autoworkers.

The deal with GM is the latest in a series of UAW-made sellout contracts stretching back 40 years. The agreement allows the company to massively expand its low-paid temporary workforce and proceed with the shutdown of three factories and one parts facility: the Lordstown, Ohio, assembly plant; the Warren and Baltimore transmission plants; and the Fontana, California, parts distribution center.

GM workers widely and angrily opposed the agreement from the moment the UAW released its contract “highlights” on October 18. Over the course of the strike, many hundreds of workers participated in online meetings hosted by the WSWS, discussing how to organize the fight back against the company’s and UAW’s demands.

To overcome this resistance, the UAW set into motion its hired PR reps, social media specialists and company spin doctors, deploying officials throughout the country to secure the deal using a combination of lies and threats at misnamed “educational sessions.” In a widely viewed Facebook video, UAW Local 1853 officials in Spring Hill, Tennessee, called the police on workers campaigning for a “no” vote a week ago.

Many workers have raised doubts over the legitimacy of the UAW’s vote tallies and balloting procedures, particularly the large “yes” votes reported at plants where substantial opposition was well-known, such as Flint Truck Assembly. As one worker commented on the UAW’s Facebook page, “I’m quite sure UAW membership DID NOT ratify this contract, in my past 24 years whenever membership votes no it still passes!”

Whatever the role of outright fraud, there is no doubt that a large proportion of workers who voted “yes” did so because they had no confidence that the UAW would respond to a contract rejection with anything better. They saw no point in enduring further hardship knowing they would only be presented with a recycled version of the same deal.

The UAW’s “ratification” of the deal resolves nothing. The contract is no more legitimate than those previously

negotiated by the bribed company agents at “Solidarity House.” If the UAW has succeeded in the short term in forcing the company’s demands through, it has done so at the expense of even further discrediting itself among workers.

The stage is now set for a showdown with workers at Ford and Fiat Chrysler.

Ford, which the UAW has selected as its next “target,” will seek concessions and costs savings to match or exceed those from GM’s layoffs and plant shutdowns. Kristin Dzikczek of the pro-corporate Center for Automotive Research told the *Wall Street Journal* Friday, “This pattern is pretty costly [to Ford and FCA] because one of the big things GM won is closing plants that will save billions. The other two don’t want to close plants. If you don’t want to close plants, what is the win for the company?”

In a statement Friday, Ford threw down the gauntlet to workers, saying it is seeking to “enhance its competitiveness” in its next contract. Industry analysts have speculated for weeks that Ford is looking to reduce its healthcare costs, estimated to top \$1 billion next year, by either raising the amount workers have to pay out of pocket or imposing restrictions on access to care.

While Wall Street responded favorably to the conclusion of the GM strike, sending GM’s stock price up 2.57 percent by market close on Friday, it has hammered Ford’s share value over the last year. CEO Jim Hackett is under pressure to accelerate his promises to impose “financial fitness” on the company through layoffs and cuts to labor costs.

The auto giants and the major finance houses that stand behind them are seeking to use the development of new technologies—including electric vehicles and artificial intelligence—to restructure the global auto industry and impose even greater levels of exploitation on workers. Key aspects of the deal with GM are the UAW’s oversight of the use of temps and the establishment of a company-union “National Committee on Advanced Technology,” which mark new milestones in the UAW’s integration into the structures of company management.

The GM strike, the longest national auto strike in the US in nearly 50 years, has objective significance far beyond its

immediate outcome. The international resurgence of class struggle has broken into the open among a crucial section of the industrial working class in the US, with effects that will continue to reverberate.

But if workers are to stop the further destruction of their jobs and living standards and prevent similar defeats at Ford, Fiat Chrysler and elsewhere, they must draw the following necessary conclusions:

1. Rank-and-file committees must be formed independent of the unions.

The UAW is not in any sense a workers' organization, but rather an entrenched arm of management, functioning ever-more openly as a de facto temp agency. As long as it remains in control of the contract bargaining process, it will continue to attempt to enforce sellout agreements, with immeasurable consequences for workers and their families: closed factories, lost jobs, poverty wages, disintegrating benefits, and increasingly dangerous working conditions.

The time is past due for workers to form their own organizations. Workers at every GM, Ford, and Fiat Chrysler plant and workplace should hold meetings and elect rank-and-file factory committees from among the most trusted workers.

These committees should draw up demands that actually correspond to what workers need. And they should establish networks of communication across the auto industry, including the auto parts sector, and with other sections of workers coming into struggle, including the 32,000 teachers and school staff striking in Chicago and the 2,000 copper miners who have walked out in Texas and Arizona.

2. Every fight by workers must be guided by an international strategy.

The GM strike, a component of the global upsurge of class struggle, has revealed the growing recognition among workers of the need for international collaboration.

Early in the strike, GM workers in Silao, Mexico, courageously defied management's demands for speed-up and overtime, refusing to be used as leverage against workers in the US. Subjected to a wave of firings and other victimizations, they appealed for support from their brothers and sisters in America.

Their stand elicited a powerful response among workers in the US, who read about their fight through the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*. The online meetings held by WSWS have taken on an ever-more explicitly international character, bringing together workers from the US, Mexico, Canada, Brazil, India and elsewhere.

This organic desire for international solidarity and collaboration must now be raised to a higher level. The globally integrated nature of production, and of the working class itself, is an objective fact. It requires workers to adopt

an international strategy, coordinate their struggles across borders and consciously reject the nationalism promoted by the unions and the political establishment.

3. The struggle for the interests of the working class requires a socialist perspective and political party.

The GM strike was not a mere contract struggle. In seeking to defend their interests, workers are raising fundamental questions about who runs society and for what purpose. As the founders of modern socialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, wrote, "Every class struggle is a political struggle."

The capitalist class is operating on the basis of a worked-out strategy. The funneling of ever greater sums into Wall Street to prop up the financial markets requires the intensification of the exploitation of the working class, the source of all profit. In particular, the corporations intend to make low-wage temporary work, with no benefits, the new normal.

Around the world, masses of workers and youth are being driven into struggle by the consequences of four decades of social counterrevolution: unending and worsening austerity, authoritarianism and war.

None of the aspirations of those coming into struggle can be met under capitalism. It is a system based on the brutal exploitation of the labor of the working class, one which subordinates all questions to the relentless drive for profit. And it is a system supported by the Democratic and Republican parties in the US and their counterparts internationally.

In order to secure any of their needs, it is necessary for workers to build a political party of their own and fight for socialism: the running of society to meet the social needs of the working class, not the profit interests of the financial oligarchy.

We urge workers to draw the necessary conclusions: Join the party fighting for this perspective, the Socialist Equality Party and build a revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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