

Worker shortage at GM truck plants highlights abysmal conditions imposed by UAW

Shannon Jones
16 June 2021

According to the *Detroit Free Press*, General Motors has been unable to recruit a sufficient number of temps to staff its truck assembly plants in Flint, Michigan and Fort Wayne, Indiana. The *Free Press* reported last Sunday that GM has succeeded in convincing only 22-25 people a week to fill 100 temporary job positions it requires every week to fully staff the Flint truck plant. A similar situation exists at the GM Fort Wayne Assembly plant.

Temporary workers earn a miserable \$16.67 an hour with no benefits. They labor under irregular schedules on jobs that are physically demanding and carry the risk of exposure to the deadly coronavirus. They have no contract rights and can be fired for petty infractions.

That such conditions prevail is an indictment of the United Auto Workers (UAW), which for decades has functioned as an adjunct of the auto companies, imposing endless concessions and suppressing workers' opposition to layoffs and wage cuts in order to boost the profits and personal wealth of the auto bosses and Wall Street. Over the past 15 years the "union" has imposed multi-tier wage and benefit systems to divide the workers and create a super-exploited, "flexible" workforce.

The reaction of the UAW to the shortage of workers willing to work for starvation wages is highly instructive. Rather than solidarizing themselves with the needs of workers, UAW officials interviewed by the *Free Press* spoke unabashedly as cheap-labor contractors, identifying with GM and offering friendly advice as to how "we" (the UAW and GM) can overcome the labor shortage.

UAW Local 2209 shop chairman Rich LeTourneau at Fort Wayne Assembly summed up the problem as follows: "We're looking to hire temps like crazy, we just can't get them. Nobody wants to come to work here."

Eric Welter, UAW Local 598 shop chairman at the Flint truck plant, said, "GM needs these trucks and I won't

continue running a schedule that doesn't support my workers and they don't want to do that either."

Welter was referring to the fact that temporary workers are used to fill in for full-time workers who are on vacation. "We'll do the job fair and we'll take it from there," he added, "but we're not going to stop until we get enough workers to take care of it. We gotta figure it out."

GM's difficulty hiring is not hard to understand. Under the federal pandemic unemployment supplement, US workers have been receiving almost as much in unemployment benefits as GM pays its temps, while saving on transportation and child care and avoiding working in crowded and unsafe factories. (This "problem" for the corporations is precisely why both big business parties are denouncing the meager \$300-a-week federal supplement as a "disincentive" to work and have begun winding up the program, first in Republican-controlled states and nationwide by September 6).

Not only that. With the assistance of the UAW, General Motors and the other auto companies have slashed the pay of thousands of autoworkers to the point where it is comparable to or even less than that of fast-food workers. As Fort Wayne Assembly shop chairman LeTourneau told the *Free Press*, "Pizza Hut is paying \$20/hour to deliver pizza here."

"I think it's BS," a GM Flint truck worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* when asked about the company's scramble to hire temporary workers. "It's nonsense to have people working side by side and some of them getting different pay rates. This should not be allowed."

Workers responding on Facebook to the reports of GM's hiring difficulties expressed no surprise, given the brutal treatment of temps. A GM worker in Flint posted a

comment, stating: “(A) LOT of people were Permanently LAID OFF people from our plant GM Flint Metal Center then given the OPPORTUNITY to be Temp workers at half the price next door at Flint Truck Plant.

“They have been TEMPS now for ALMOST TWO YEARS and if they wanted to be Permanent Workers again given the OPPORTUNITY to do that if they transferred to plants outside the Flint area. Some transferred to Bay City about 50 miles north of here to take those jobs. Meanwhile they spent over a year as Temps, not gaining Seniority or Retirement credits all while being given the PRIVILEGE of paying Union Dues.”

Another worker posted: “From what I’ve heard they have worked those people (including current Temps) so much they have MANY (I’ve heard in the HUNDREDS) out on Sick Leave right now. And I believe the Truck Plant is the one with the FLOATING Contract.”

The *Free Press* cites Flint Truck shop chairman Welter as urging GM to drop its pre-employment drug test to increase the pool of job applicants. The newspaper continues: “The \$16.67 starting wage is in the union’s national agreement, but perhaps GM should approach the union and ask to boost it, he [Welter] said.”

This is a revealing remark. A UAW leader suggests that the company ask the union for permission to raise wages! This in itself exposes the fraud of the UAW, and the rest of the AFL-CIO unions, as “workers’ organizations.”

A genuine union would demand the reopening of the contract to end the hated tier system and provide substantial raises to bring all workers up to a decent standard of living.

The response of the UAW to GM’s hiring problems goes a long way in explaining how the automaker increased its pretax profit in the pandemic year of 2020 to \$9.7 billion, up from \$8.4 billion in 2019.

Work in the auto plants was once among the most highly-paid industrial jobs in the US. This was the result of massive class battles waged by autoworkers, beginning with the wave of sit-down strikes in the late 1930s, including the Flint sit-down of 1936-37, which forced GM to recognize the UAW.

But for the past four decades, the UAW has collaborated with the auto companies in driving down wages and eviscerating benefits and working conditions. This process accelerated in 2009, when the UAW agreed, as part of the Obama administration’s forced bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler, to slash the pay for all new-hires by 50 percent, to around \$15 an hour. The 2015 national

contract allowed a vast expansion of the number of temporary workers, providing massive cost savings to the auto companies.

Widespread outrage over the abuse of temporary part-time workers (TPTs), along with stagnant wages and the division of workers into tiers with different pay scales for the same work, sparked the 40-day strike by General Motors workers in 2019.

After isolating the strike while starving workers on \$275 a week in strike pay, the UAW announced a settlement and called a vote on a sellout agreement. While the contract supposedly provides a “pathway” to full-time status for TPT workers, temps have to wait three years to become permanent, starting at the bottom tier without credit for the time they have already spent in the plant. It maintains the poverty-level pay scale for temps and new-hires, while providing a tiny pay increase for more senior workers that does not even compensate for inflation.

Not mentioned by the *Free Press*, but certainly a major deterrent for prospective new hires, is the ongoing COVID pandemic. The UAW has enforced round-the-clock production schedules at auto plants, despite the fact that they are vectors for COVID-19 transmission. Hundreds of autoworkers have contracted COVID-19 and scores have died, although the actual totals aren’t known because the UAW has worked with management to cover up the numbers.

Anger over such conditions has sparked a rebellion by Volvo workers in Virginia, who are on strike after having twice voted down sellout contracts brought back by the UAW.

We urge GM workers to follow the lead of Volvo workers by forming a rank-and-file committee independent of the UAW to oppose unsafe conditions, low wages and the abuse of temporary workers. Such committees are being established across the US and internationally, to unite and coordinate the struggles of autoworkers, educators, Amazon workers, steelworkers and all sections of the working class, based on the fight to meet the needs of workers, not what the corporations say they can afford.

Flint and Fort Wayne truck workers wanting to find out more should contact the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact