“Workers aren’t getting bailed out like the billionaires”: Detroit workers livid over surging gas prices

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Workers filling up their tanks at gas stations across the United States are getting angrier over the sharp rise in fuel prices, which has cut deeply into their paychecks. Many US workers in the US regularly travel 50 miles or more one way to get to work. Gas prices jumped 18.3 percent last month and are up 48 percent since March 2021.

According to the US Labor Department, inflation hit 8.5 percent in March, the highest since 1981. On Thursday, the Department reported that wholesale prices rose 11.2 percent in March, largely due to the surge in energy prices.

Workers’ wages have largely been stagnant for years, with annual raises limited to about two percent. Despite the complaints from big business about rapidly rising wages, real average hourly earnings fell 2.7 percent between March 2021 and March 2022. This has left workers scrambling to reduce spending, work even longer hours and take on more credit card debt.

At a Speedway gas station in the working class suburb of Warren, Michigan, just north of Detroit, workers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters as they were filling up their tanks. The instant and universal response to the question of what they thought about rising prices was: “It sucks.”

The reporters distributed copies of the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* and discussed the statement “A working class program to fight inflation” with workers. The statement calls for an immediate 40 percent increase in wages to offset declining real income over the last five years, a cost-of-living escalator to index wages to rising expenses, and measures to protect retiree benefits and halt price-gouging by the oil companies.

The gas station is just south of the Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler) Warren Truck Assembly Plant where thousands of workers can hardly afford to travel to and from work. One worker said, “I’ve stopped filling my tank all the way up. I just put enough in to go from Point A to Point B. In the grocery stores people are just buying the necessities because food prices are up too.”

He said workers had risked their lives throughout the pandemic making profits for Stellantis and other corporations, and that several people had died from COVID-19 at his plant. Now they were trying to force older workers to take early retirement packages so they could be replaced with so-called “Supplemental” workers who are essentially low-paid at-will employees. “After making all those profits for them, they are trying to get rid of the older workers, the ‘dinosaurs,’ so they can bring in younger workers and treat them like crap.”

“This is the second time I’m filling up my gas tank this week,” Dane, a tile and stone worker, told the WSWS. “We’ll be lucky if it doesn’t go any higher because I can’t see prices coming down too soon. I’m from Mt. Clemens, I work in Bloomfield, and I pick up my kids from schools in Warren.” This is a round trip of at least 60 miles, he said. “It’s costing me $90 a week to pay for gas.

“Biden is saying it’s Putin’s fault, but this happened way before Ukraine. The president’s approval rating is in the toilet. It’s outrageous how much profits the oil companies are making. It’s the working class that is being hit the hardest. Prices are up, but our wages aren’t. These food and gas prices need to come back down.”

Pointing to the inequality in society, he said, “I build a lot of bathrooms in wealthy neighborhoods. I would never in my life be able to afford to have one of my own. I pay attention to what is happening in the world. People are revolting because of food and energy prices. I only wonder how long it’s going to take before that happens here.”

A young worker who stopped at the station said: “There should be a price ceiling and nothing above it should be allowed. Nowadays, young workers need more than one way to make money. They can’t rely on the basic jobs that the older generation could keep for 30 or 40 years. There used to be good-paying jobs, but those are few and far apart for my generation now.”

“It’s crazy; I’m paying just too much for gas,” Chris, a pipefitter, said. “It was already going up way before the war and Biden is just using that as an excuse. I brought my old car out because I get 25 miles per gallon with it, instead of 14 or 15 with my pickup truck. It’s making noise, but I’m keeping it on the road because I would have paid $90 to fill up my truck.

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Workers don't get bailouts and tax write-offs, like Bezos and the other billionaires who don't pay any taxes."

"Wages don't keep up with prices," a factory worker who stopped at the gas station with her children said. "You have to work lots of overtime to meet expenses and that takes away time with your family. Now the plants are down because of the microchip shortage, so there are no extra funds."

Bailey, who purchases secondhand and used items for resale, said he had made two trips to the gas station today alone for work, paying $40 each time. "Every time something goes on, they blame it on COVID or this or that. This is BS. The oil companies are making billions of dollars, they're not hurting.

"Now they're saying they don't have enough workers. Well, I mean they're still making millions of dollars, so if you offer guys a hundred bucks an hour, I bet you'll get workers. At gas stations like this, instead of working eight hours they're working them eighteen hours, and they're only giving them the same amount of pay.

"My friend's dad works in Lima, Ohio at the tank plant. They're building tanks left and right now. He hasn't had a day off in like three years, outside of vacation time." Expressing concern over the danger of a wider war with Russia, Bailey said, "We should stay out of Ukraine. It doesn't have anything to do with us."

"Food and gas prices are going up but we're bringing home the same amount of money," a young worker said. "Our wages should go up by the same amount as food and gas."

A retired Chrysler worker said, "I get $4,000 a month for my pension, but everything is going up and up. Soon enough, I'll have to get a job and go back to work. We have to fight this. It's pitiful. The cost of living is going to be as high as California soon."

Another Warren Truck worker added: "The gas prices are affecting me a lot. I drive 80 miles a day and it just cost me $73 to fill up my tank. It's like we're giving them a bigger piece of our paychecks just to come to work. People are starting to revolt all over the world because of food and energy prices and it's time we do that here. But we need an army of workers to stand up."

A 29-year veteran autoworker at the truck assembly plant added, "I travel 62 miles one-way to work and the gas prices are killing me. It's costing me $40 a day to drive, when it used to be $18. I'm driving a truck and I can't get a new car because there aren't any. This is killing everybody—and I think that's what they want to do."

Asked what he thought about Biden's effort to blame Putin for the price hikes, he said, "Russia has legitimate concerns. I don't believe NATO left Putin any choice. I don't believe anything that comes from the mainstream media.

"I've been working seven days a week for a whole year. My body is worn out and they just scheduled me for mandatory overtime on Easter Sunday. The UAW lets this go on. The union is nothing but a big bureaucracy. All they care about is the money they are paid for signing away our livelihoods. We need to get rid of it and build something new to replace it."

Pointing to the real causes of runaway inflation, he added, "Both parties have been printing so much money to keep the stock market going and now the dollar's not worth the paper they print it on. It makes no difference if you have the Republicans or Democrats in power. Both parties are making the working class pay."

The decades-long suppression of wages, backed by the UAW and other unions, has enabled the US government to spend trillions to prop up the stock markets, particularly since the 2008 Crash. The end result has been a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the super-rich.

The labor shortage produced by the pandemic, however, has led to a modest uptick in wages, still far outpaced by inflation. This has led to calls for the Federal Reserve to more aggressively raise interest rates even if this drives the economy into recession. The purpose of this policy is to terrorize workers with the prospect of mass unemployment and beat back their wage demands. There is widespread support in ruling circles for these measures.

New York Times columnist and liberal economist Paul Krugman spelled this out earlier this week, writing: "Rising wages are a good thing, but right now they're rising at an unsustainable pace: This excess wage growth probably won't recede until the demand for workers falls back into line with the available supply, which probably—I hate to say this—means that we need to see unemployment tick up at least a bit."

Just like workers in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Greece, Peru and many other countries, American workers are being driven into struggle by the ruling class attack on their living standards. Earlier this week, *Newsweek* warned in an article, titled, "America is heading for class warfare," that "Nothing has revealed the class divide in the U.S. quite like runaway inflation and skyrocketing gas prices." It continued, "As millions struggle to fill their tanks and pay their rent, sales of business jets to the rising ranks of billionaires have soared to new heights."

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