

“We’re standing for the working class, the politicians are coming here for the cameras”: Striking Michigan Ford workers speak out

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Several hundred workers were on the picket line at Ford Michigan Assembly Plant (MAP) on Tuesday afternoon. There was a large media presence at the suburban Detroit plant in anticipation of President Biden’s visit to United Auto Workers picket lines in Michigan, following an invitation by UAW President Shawn Fain. Despite initial reports that Biden would visit MAP where 4,600 UAW members are currently on strike, the White House and the UAW chose the nearby Willow Run GM Redistribution Center, with just 200 striking workers, for the president’s photo-op.

Ford workers who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters expressed a strong determination to fight. Virtually all workers, full-time and part-time, said they were finding it increasingly hard to survive on already inadequate pay that has been further ravaged by inflation. Workers expressed little enthusiasm for either corporate-controlled party, with many expressing the view that Biden’s visit was simply a publicity stunt.

Mark, a 26-year veteran worker at Ford Michigan Assembly, was on the picket line with his son, also a Ford worker. Mark was not impressed by Biden’s visit. “You know how it is with politicians, they are just trying to make themselves look good.”

He said even though he was working at top pay scale, he finds it hard to live. “I work full time and I’ve worked two jobs for 26 years to take care of my family. I do construction on the side,” he said.

“The last contracts have all been junk,” he continued,

“all you got was a little signing bonus.”

Mark expressed the hope that UAW President Shawn Fain would be different than previous UAW administrations who had imposed one concessions contract after another.

WSWS reporters explained that Fain had signed the 2009 concessions contract that instituted the two-tier wage scale and eliminated pensions for new hires while slashing tens of thousands of jobs. He worked at the UAW-Chrysler Department under Norwood Jewell, a top UAW official sent to prison for taking illegal payoffs from the company.

“I just get disgusted with what is happening” he said. “The longer I am here the more I see it. They have their own little thing over there,” he said, pointing to the UAW Local 900 union hall.

Mark’s son said that the younger workers could not live on the low wages being paid by Ford under the UAW contract. “Workers are getting discouraged. Many of them don’t stay, they go find other jobs pretty quickly.”

A 40-year veteran of Ford said he was disgusted with the arrogance of management. “They give their CEOs a 40 percent raise and spend billions on stock buybacks.”

He said he was concerned that there could be a repeat of past contract struggles that had been betrayed by the UAW bureaucracy. “The GM workers were out for 40 days in 2019 and in the end, they got the same contract shoved down their throats that they had rejected at the start.”

He said he had been encouraged by the fact that Fain had reported progress in the talks with Ford. WSWS reporters pointed out that Ford has gone furthest in preparing to spin-off its electric vehicle operations and no matter what wage promises the company and the union made to workers many of them would never see it

because they would be losing their jobs. Fain has also betrayed the strikes by Clarios battery workers in Ohio, and Lear workers in Indiana had voted down the same UAW-backed sellout contract three times.

“There is corruption everywhere,” the worker replied.

The worker had heard news that the Canadian autoworkers union Unifor had gotten a deal with Ford but did not know the details. WSWS reporters explained that the three-year contract included an average of 5 percent—while inflation in Canada is 4 percent—and maintained the hated two-tier system. Unifor pushed through the deal under dubious conditions by ignoring the “no” vote by skilled trades workers and enticing low-paid temporary part-time to vote for the deal by offering them a \$4,000 “signing bonus.”

“When they give you a big signing bonus you know you are being screwed,” the veteran worker said. “They give you a bonus rather than a wage increase because they don’t want your pay going up. But then they take 40 percent in taxes out of your bonus and the union takes dues.

“What gets me is that all these concessions were done with a handshake agreement behind our backs. I feel bad for the next generation.”

Another worker said the companies “could give us two times what we are asking for and they would be fine. I think there has been a class war going on for a long time.”

A temporary full-time worker (TFT) said she had only recently hired in and was struggling on the wages paid by Ford. She described getting up in the early hours of the morning to go to another job before clocking in at Ford. “We should all be made full time and get raises. I need more money. I left a \$700 a week job to come here. I have had utilities cut off, eviction notices. Strike pay is \$70 more a week than I was making all week working at Ford.”

She agreed when WSWS reporters pointed out that the “stand up” strike being conducted by the UAW under Fain was ineffective. “They make billions, if they lose a few thousand dollars, they don’t care. I say everybody in the Big Three should shut down. What we are doing today will affect my future and my grandchildren. We should not take “no” for an answer. We want back everything we gave up in 2009, COLA, pensions, overtime. I want this strike over soon, but I want it to go on and on if needed to get what we want.”

The WSWS also spoke to two younger Michigan Assembly workers, Matt and Brenden. Neither was impressed with the visit by President Biden.

Brenden said, “Trump-Biden, that doesn’t matter to us. Neither one of them stands for what we’re out here for.”

Matt agreed, “It’s the working class versus the millionaires and billionaires, and they are both for the two parties. We are standing here for the working class, but the politicians are coming just to smile for the cameras.”

Matt said he had seen what Biden had done to the railroad workers last year and also the sellout contract that had been imposed on oil workers in 2022 just before the start of the Ukraine war. “I have friends in the oil industry who lost their jobs after that contract,” Brenden said.

Both Matt and Brenden said it was hard for young autoworkers to earn enough to support themselves.

Matt said he was a third-generation autoworker. “Previously working in an auto plant was a great career. But we are now seriously struggling. We don’t get good wages. The auto companies are making millions and we are making pennies. I have three kids and a wife and we have just \$80 to spend a week on groceries. That will buy just three bags. Many people think we have a good job, but that is not the reality.”

Brenden agreed. “The conditions of the young autoworker don’t make sense. You cannot earn a living wage. They can’t keep workers in the plant when workers can go to McDonald’s and make \$21 an hour.”

When WSWS reporters explained that the working class had to adopt a global strategy to fight transnational corporations like Ford, which seek to pit workers in various countries against each other, Brandon responded, “We work with Chinese and Mexican people, we are all trying to build the American Dream, and the companies are trying to pit us against each other.”



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