

Detroit casino workers march as opposition grows to phony UAW “stand up” strike

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Hundreds of striking Detroit casino workers and Blue Cross Blue Shield workers participated in a march and rally Thursday called by the United Auto Workers and a coalition of unions. The Detroit March for Workers’ Rights and Economic Justice held at Hart Plaza served as a platform for AFL-CIO President Liz Schuler, Michigan Democratic politicians and top officials from the UAW, UNITE-HERE and Teamsters to posture as defenders of workers’ rights.

Over 3,700 Detroit casino workers, members of the five unions comprising the Detroit Casino Council, walked out Tuesday following the expiration of a strike deadline. The walkout includes workers at MGM Grand, MotorCity and Hollywood Casino at Greektown. It is the first strike since the legalization of casino gambling in Detroit in the 1990s.

More than 1,000 Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan workers, members of the UAW, have been on strike for over one month. They work in the customer service, claims and maintenance departments of the \$30 billion health insurance company and are fighting for wage increases to offset soaring inflation as well as decent health care benefits and an end to outsourcing.

These strikes are taking place simultaneously with the ongoing contract struggle of 146,000 workers at the Detroit Three auto companies. Despite the expiration of the contract September 14, UAW President Shawn Fain has called out only 23 percent of UAW membership, and no workers at Stellantis or GM plants in the Detroit area, major profit centers for the companies. The battle lines were expanded after 4,000 Mack Trucks workers in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Florida walked out October 9 after rejecting a sellout contract recommended by Fain.

Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, who ran as a socialist for UAW president in 2022, visited the picket

line of Detroit casino workers the first day of their strike. He distributed an open letter from the Mack Trucks Rank-and-File Committee calling for a united fight of Mack workers and all Detroit Three autoworkers instead of the phony “stand up” strike called by Fain.

The hastily convened rally had something of the character of damage control by UAW apparatus, which has been staggered by the expanding rebellion of UAW members who are demanding compensation for decades of concessions and the enormous sacrifices made during the pandemic. The presence of so many top-level union officials indicates nervousness at the coalescing of strikes in metro Detroit, still the center of US auto production.

The union officials and Democrats, including Michigan Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist, offered nothing but empty pledges of solidarity. There was something almost obscene in the spectacle of union bureaucrats like Liz Schuler, UNITE HERE Secretary Treasurer Gwen Mills, and Teamsters Secretary Treasurer Fred Zuckerman, all with annual pay in the six-figure range, pledging solidarity with casino workers, some who as union members earn as little as \$11 an hour. Fain, who reportedly attended the rally, did not speak. Instead, he sent up Vice President Mike Booth and Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Mock, who said nothing about expanding the strike by Detroit Three autoworkers.

In contrast, the workers in attendance expressed determination to win their demands and sentiment for expanding their fight beyond the confines being set by the union bureaucrats.

One striking casino worker, said “It is awful. We are working paycheck to paycheck, you can’t afford to miss any time. We are one step from being homeless

basically.”

Many workers said they held two jobs to earn enough to live. “Your body can only take so much before it shuts down. But with the way the economy is, your body is just dying out. We are not getting any younger, we shouldn’t have to work past 70. We should be able to enjoy our life.”

A young striker, Ken, said of the various strikes in Detroit, “It’s unbelievable, all the strikes, it shows it is everywhere. The auto companies don’t seem to be giving any leeway.” Referring to the massive contract rejection by Mack Truck workers of a contract offering 19 percent raise over five years he said, “I would have voted against that in a second.”

Casino workers said management was trying to impose a vast increase in out-of-pocket medical costs.

A casino skilled trades worker said, “We are behind what other tradesmen make. With the increases they are asking in health care and what they are offering in wages we would be minus.”

He said inflation was ravaging his paycheck, “We have six boys and we are paying \$700 more per month than we did pre-COVID.”

Another casino worker, Dorothy, a dealer, described how the unions agreed to a contract extension in the midst of COVID, forcing workers back on the job during the pandemic without any substantial pay increase. “We have been under the same contract for eight years. We have had only minimal raises, 27 cents per year. The dealers, cashiers, valets we all have minimum wages” starting around \$10. “The tips help us make a living, but that is based on the generosity of the people. We need a fair base pay to have enough to live on.

“They are trying to make us pay more for health care. So it is not really a raise. Inflation has increased and everything is up. I work two jobs to help take care of my family, about 60-70 hours a week. I want to work one job. That’s why we are on strike.”

Another worker said, “All we are asking is to adjust the salary so we can survive. We can’t afford to eat, to pay the rent to survive.”

A Blue Cross Blue Shield Michigan worker, Junii, said, he worked on Medicare Advantage, “They didn’t want to sign a contract making one tier instead of two tiers. They didn’t want to raise wages or continue benefits. They didn’t want to give us our bonus. As a

young man, 38 years old, I want better. I am supporting a five-year-old son.

“My father worked in a Ford plant. I grew up under the union.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* explained that workers at Big Three now started at around \$16. “As far as those wages, my father was making that in 1997. It is very unfair. No time off. The company is riding on people’s back. They know it is unfair. But, they truly believe we don’t deserve it.”

Referring to the call by Mack Trucks workers for an all-out strike by all workers at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis he said, “I see the UAW is trying to chip away a little a time, but I definitely feel the company’s would feel it if we all collectively strike.”

Speaking about the Israeli war against Palestine, Junii admitted he didn’t understand all the issues, but said, “I feel the loss of human life is terrible. I can only speak from my own experience, and I know that America is not always right. Radical groups, they call ‘terrorist,’ come from the oppression of the people. It is a struggle everywhere.”



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