Workers strike auto parts manufacturer in Findlay, Ohio

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About 150 workers at an auto parts plant in Findlay, Ohio launched a strike on March 24 for better wages and health benefits.

The strike began at Freudenberg-NOK after talks with United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 1327 broke down. Workers at the company produce seals, O-rings, gaskets and other components critical for engines, transmissions, drivetrains and hydraulic systems. In addition to Findlay, Freudenberg-NOK has operations in Sandusky, Ohio, as well as in Michigan, Wisconsin, New Hampshire and Georgia. The company also operates in Canada, Mexico and Brazil.

Neither the UAW nor the company has made public statements about the content of the contract negotiations. Workers say the strike centers on demands for higher wages, more affordable healthcare and what they describe as a fair overall contract. They have also emphasized the need for compensation and benefits that keep pace with rising costs.

According to online listings, starting pay ranges from $18 to $22 an hour, with top rates reaching only $25 to $30 an hour. The company maintains a small workforce and meets quotas by requiring overtime, which workers rely on due to low base pay.

Located about 60 miles south of Toledo, parts from the Findlay plant make their way into the final assembly of engines, cars and light trucks produced by General Motors, Ford and Stellantis throughout the Great Lakes region.

Workers are in a powerful position, as their strike has the potential to halt production at the Big Three automakers. The strike could attract significant support from assembly workers, who are dealing with massive layoffs as the automakers attempt to offload the costs of lower-than-expected electric vehicle sales. Earlier this week, GM announced it would lay off the only remaining shift at its Factory Zero plant in Detroit, which only a few years ago the company had trumpeted as the flagship of its EV transformation.

This potential support must be activated through initiative from below, through the development of a rank-and-file strike committee at the plant. Such a committee would assert democratic control over the strike and appeal for support from other Freudenberg-NOK plants, including unionized facilities in Sandusky, Ohio, and Necedah, Wisconsin. It would urge Ford, General Motors and Stellantis workers to refuse to work with any parts coming from Freudenberg-NOK plants.

This must take the form of a fight against the union apparatus. Rather than mobilizing the power of the working class, the UAW bureaucracy is leaving workers at the Findlay facility isolated. The UAW has not spread the strike to other Freudenberg-NOK facilities, allowing the company to shift critical manufacturing to its other plants to meet orders. Nor has the UAW instructed its members at GM, Ford and Stellantis to refuse to handle Freudenberg-NOK parts until workers win their strike.

While UAW members in Findlay are on strike, the union is seeking to push through a sellout contract on 1,100 Nexteer workers in Saginaw, Michigan. The new contract cuts wages for new hires, effectively establishing a third tier. It also contains substantial givebacks on out-of-pocket benefit costs.

For decades, the UAW has collaborated with the auto companies to cut workers' wages and benefits as corporations seek to boost profits. At the same time, wages and living standards for workers in parts supply have diverged sharply from those of assembly-line workers at major automakers, reflecting the growth of a vast, lower-paid supplier network.

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This process was greatly accelerated following the 2009 bailout of the auto industry under the Obama administration. The terms of the bailout included massive concessions, including wage freezes, cuts to retiree healthcare and the introduction of second-tier wage structures for new hires. The UAW played a critical role in suppressing workers' opposition and enforcing one concessionary contract after another.

Economists note that inflation has further widened this gap. According to research from the Economic Policy Institute, average real hourly earnings for motor vehicle workers—including both Detroit automakers and parts suppliers—have fallen significantly since the 2008 crisis, with wages failing to keep pace with rising prices for housing, healthcare and other living expenses.

The UAW has supported automakers' reliance on outsourcing to suppliers in order to reduce costs in the competitive global auto market. By shifting large portions of production to independent parts manufacturers, automakers reduce direct labor costs and transfer wage pressures onto subcontractors, while eliminating tens of thousands of jobs.

Left isolated, the company will ride it out. The strength of Findlay workers lies in their position in the supply chain and in the potential support of autoworkers across the region. This can be realized only through the formation of a rank-and-file committee, linking up with workers at other Freudenberg-NOK plants and throughout the auto industry to broaden the struggle and prevent its shutdown.

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