

Strong rank-and-file opposition to UAW sellout evident at local meetings

By Shannon Jones
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The response from General Motors workers attending United Auto Workers informational meetings to hear details of the new tentative contract demonstrates the irreconcilable divide between rank-and-file auto workers and the union bureaucracy.

On Sunday a WSWs team distributed a statement calling for rejection of the tentative settlement to GM workers in Flint, Michigan and received an enthusiastic reception. The workers were attending a local informational meeting called by UAW Local 659, which covers workers at the Metal Fabricating Center, Flint Engine South and other smaller facilities.

Flint is the birthplace of General Motors and the site of the 1936-37 GM sit-down strike, which established the United Auto Workers as a mass industrial union. At its peak in 1978 nearly 80,000 people worked for GM in the city; only about 8,000 are left after the most recent 2006 buyouts. Once enjoying one of the highest per capita incomes in America, Flint is scourged with poverty and crime today, with some 38 percent of its children growing up poor.

The WSWs statement, entitled “Vote ‘no’ on UAW sellout! Elect rank-and-file committees for contract,” called for the rejection of the contract and for auto workers to break free from the control of the union and take the struggle into their own hands by electing rank-and-file strike and negotiating committees. It advanced a socialist alternative to the UAW bureaucracy’s support for the profit system and the Democratic Party.

As one former Delphi worker, whose father was a sit-down striker, told the WSWs, “It looks like we are giving up what I worked 37 years and my dad worked 47 years obtaining.”

Workers were angry and suspicious over the fact that the UAW had given them no information on the

contract. They were also skeptical of the non-stop propaganda in the news media, which is parroting the lies of the UAW bureaucracy that the settlement protects jobs and benefits. That morning’s *Flint Journal* printed a front-page article, featuring quotes for local area UAW officials enthusiastically praising the sellout. Typical were the remarks of Local 659 Tool and Die Shop Committee Chairman Wayne Clontz, who boasted, “This is a great contract, we got a great deal.”

A skilled trade worker, with 22 years seniority, asked to take extra copies of the leaflet to distribute. He told the WSWs, “There is a reason that the union is keeping everything quiet. They went on strike two days just to make everything look good for the company and the UAW. It was a setup. We’ve never been asked to return to work before a vote.

“They are going to say they are guaranteeing jobs. There are no guaranteed jobs. They are going to offer more buyouts to bring in lower wage workers. We had 800 take buyouts last year alone.

“They screwed a lot of guys with this two-tier wage. Who can live on \$14 an hour—no benefits, no retirement, nothing? They are going to call anything “non-core” that they want,” he said, referring to the provision that allows GM to pay far lower wages and benefits to non-assembly line workers, including material handlers, janitors and others.

He also indicated skepticism in the Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association, (VEBA) a trust fund to be managed by the union to oversee retiree health care benefits.

“If the UAW gets hold of that money, then the retirees are going to have problems.” He said. “They are taking 40 cents a year from our cost of living to this VEBA. Are we financing this or is GM financing this?”

We gave up \$1.00 last year and 2 cents from our quarterly COLA. Now it's another \$1.60 an hour that they are taking (over four years). That is like \$150,000 an hour that GM is getting. Do you know how much money that is?"

Another worker from the Flint Service Parts Operations told the WSWS, "I hear they are planning to sell all the SPOs, that is what is going to fund VEBA. Where else is GM going to get \$38 billion? They are going to sell all the remaining parts plants. This is the last parts plant. I have been to Shreveport, Louisiana, Boston, Baltimore, I've been around.

"This is the best they can do, they said. They say without this there are going to be layoffs. Well, I'll bet in November (after ratification) there will be layoffs."

James, who also works at the Flint SPO told the WSWS, "Most here are within 3-5 years of retirement and are not pleased with the outcome. Why don't the people at the top take cuts? Why is it always those on the bottom who have to have their wages cut?"

Afterwards a worker spoke with the WSWS about what happened at the meeting. "There were International UAW reps and local officials making it sound like this was the best contract ever. They said retiree benefits would be guaranteed even if the company went bankrupt and that GM had to remove its obligations from their books in order to make it look like they were making good profits.

"They spoke about the VEBA going broke at Caterpillar and Detroit Diesel but they said those trusts hadn't been set up right. There would be a third party taking care of the trust this time and the UAW would sit on the board, with the fund being monitored every year to keep it on the up and up. They had to say this because workers don't trust the union with their retirement benefits.

"They tried to put dollar signs in front of peoples' eyes to get this approved. But I'm leery of it. They are going to get rid of us older workers and replace us with people making \$14 an hour and few benefits.

"I'm a material handler, doing one of the so-called 'non-core' jobs. The guy who takes my place will get lower pay even though he is working next to someone making twice as much.

"Fourteen dollars an hour might sound good to someone who doesn't have a job. But in a few years these younger workers, who have not been getting what

we were making, are going to say, 'Let's get rid of these retirees, I'm not paying for them anymore.' That's what GM wants.

"To me this is a Delphi Jr. In the end, GM could just dissolve and we'll be on the streets in our 50s looking for work. These are the biggest give-backs we've ever made. The union has been hostile to the interests of workers for a long time."

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