

Autoworkers speak out

GM workers: “If we can’t gain when they’re making profits, we’ll never get anything”

By Jerry White
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General Motors workers voted overwhelmingly for strike action across the country last week with “yes” votes making up 97 percent of the total. After a decade-long wage freeze, workers want to abolish the two-tier wage system accepted by the UAW and recoup their lost income now that the automaker is reaping huge profits and rewarding its top investors with billions.

GM, the world’s third largest automaker, made \$1.12 billion in profits in the second quarter despite falling revenue due to the economic crisis in China, Latin America and Europe. The company’s profit center was in North America, where GM made a pre-tax profit of \$2.78 billion compared with \$1.39 billion in the second quarter of last year.

The UAW has made it clear that the strike votes are simply a formality. It has no intention of calling a walkout when the four-year labor agreements expire at midnight on September 14 with GM, Fiat-Chrysler and Ford. The UAW has kept workers in the dark about its negotiations with the automakers, while moving behind workers’ backs to introduce a third tier of even lower paid workers. The union also hopes to take over the provision and reduction of workers’ medical benefits from an expanded health care trust.

A second-tier worker from GM’s Arlington, Texas plant recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* after working an expanded shift on a Saturday night. “You never know until 15 minutes before you’re ready to leave if they are going to tell you to stay on longer,” he said. “They are trying to reach an output quota of cars for the day and we’re the last shift.”

The factory’s 3,200 workers build the company’s highly profitable full-size sports utility vehicles—the

Cadillac Escalade, Chevrolet Suburban and Chevrolet Tahoe, and GMC Yukon/XLYukon Denali/XL models. Some of luxury models sell for over \$70,000.

Speaking about the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter, the worker said, “I like it because it is informative. These negotiations have been hush-hush. I’ve got five uncles who retired from this plant and they said there have never been talks like this before. We deserve to know what the UAW is discussing with the companies.

“Why should we accept an expanded VEBA [Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association—the union-controlled health care trust]? UAW President Dennis Williams tried that with Caterpillar and it didn’t work out and retirees had to pay out of their pockets. Why do it again?” (In 1998, the UAW agreed to sweeping cuts in retiree benefits after the company capped payments and the VEBA allegedly ran out of money.)

“The union is based on a business model. They want to take over health care from GM and then they will have an incentive to cut our benefits.”

Discussing the supposed economic turnaround in the United States hailed by President Obama and the media, he said, “The recovery has only been for the rich. GM has hired youngsters on the second tier wage who think \$17 or \$18 an hour is good because there is nothing else out here but minimum wage jobs.

“We voted by 98 percent for a strike. This company made \$1.1 billion in second quarter profits and is handing all this money over to the shareholders, not the workers at the root of those profits. The problem is not the Mexican workers—they just want to pit us against them. If we can’t gain anything now—when the company is making record profits—we’ll never get

anything. We want to fight.”

Workers at GM’s giant Lordstown, Ohio complex, located halfway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, voted by 96 percent to authorize a strike. A veteran worker with four decades in the plant told the WSWS, “People are complaining about the two-tier system here and are definitely willing to strike. You already have workers earning \$15 to \$18 an hour right next to \$29-an-hour workers.

“Years ago you had the company on one side and the union on the other. Now the UAW is more for the company. My union leader won’t fight for anything and GM gets what it wants.”

Referring to the UAW’s willingness to allow the company to bring in workers from supplier companies and pay them wages even lower than the present tier-two workers, she said, “GM is already getting an area of the plant ready where they will put lower paid ‘material handlers’ who will carry parts from suppliers who will back right up to the plant.

“My father was a steelworker from Campbell, Ohio, next to Youngstown. Workers had to fight hard to get what they needed. Then they shut the steel mills down. I can remember the wildcat strikes here at the Lordstown plant in the early 1970s. A scab was shot and killed who tried to cross the picket line. The worker was sent to prison, but the scabs didn’t come back.

“Yesterday the UAW passed out fliers telling us we’d only get \$200 a week in strike pay if we walked out. There are also rumors they are going to dangle a \$10,000 dollar signing bonus if the contract is approved. In my view, the bigger the signing bonus they offer, the worse the contract is.

“Why sign your job away? The workingman is the reason they get their profits. The steelworkers, the postal workers, the workers in my plant, if we don’t build things there would be nothing for the people at the top. Why does the workingman have to suffer while executives and bankers sit in their air-conditioned offices?

“We make everything and they want us to go toothless, sick and blind. They are taking away our vision and dental care and forcing us onto these cut-rate generic medicines so we get sick and expire sooner--that’s what they want.

“Give us what we worked for. Give us our pensions

and the health care we were promised. Give the new generation a decent future. That’s what we want.”

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