

BMW auto worker describes conditions at Spartanburg, South Carolina manufacturing plant

By Keisha Gibbs
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A young autoworker at BMW in South Carolina recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about the conditions workers face in the auto industry in the US South.

Ethan (not his real name), a worker at the BMW Spartanburg plant, recently moved from Michigan, where he worked for Fiat Chrysler.

The BMW Spartanburg plant, located in Greer, South Carolina, opened in 1994 and currently manufactures BMW's X models luxury sport activity vehicles. It is the largest BMW plant in the world, employing more than 10,000 people, and manufactures around 400,000 vehicles a year, 70 percent of which are exported to markets around the globe.

The majority of workers at the Spartanburg plant are employed by MAU Workforce Solutions, a private contractor. Both MAU and BMW employees start at \$17.50 an hour. The difference is, BMW employees get pay raises, a healthcare program, and are able to lease a BMW car for a reasonable price. MAU employees get \$17.50 and no benefits. This is about the same rate of starting pay as temporary part time workers employed at plants of the Detroit-based US automakers.

Ethan said BMW purposely keeps the contract workers and BMW workers at a 60/40 ratio. A physical test is required to become a BMW employee. "Once you slow down," Ethan said, "you fail and they tell you to try again next year. So you keep doing the same job you would be doing for BMW, but you're still an MAU employee."

"Some people have been working for the temp company [MAU] for eight years. So if you're hired by MAU [and work for them for years], BMW hires you and you still make \$17.50 for another year before you

start getting pay raises. So then it takes another four years to reach the top of the pay scale."

The last time BMW hired, according to Ethan, "BMW hired right off the street with no experience instead of hiring temp employees from MAU."

A \$130 million incentive package from the local government, convenient transportation routes to the Port of Charleston, and above all, cheap labor enticed BMW to build the Spartanburg plant. Workers at Spartanburg make half the amount of German BMW workers.

The area of Greer, South Carolina was impoverished before BMW came. BMW said it "adopted South Carolina culture."

Ethan remarked that BMW workers are told "they are lucky to have a job" and to put the company's interest above their own self-interest.

Ethan described conditions in which management paid little attention to questions of safety. "They [BMW] don't really train safety. They react when something happens. I don't wish for something to happen, but that's what it will take before it will get better."

"They [the workers] know it's wrong. They talk amongst themselves and don't talk to management."

In March a contract worker died in the paint shop at the Spartanburg plant after apparently being caught in a vehicle lift. Bojan Sprah, age 45, suffered head trauma and died at the scene of the injury, according to local press reports. In 2016 Ronnie Lee Hall, a 55-year-old contract worker, fell to his death while working on a construction job at the plant.

An investigation by the state of South Carolina cited BMW for four safety violations relating to the death of

Sprah, but only imposed \$6,975 in fines, a derisory amount less than 1/10 the cost of a new BMW vehicle.

Before moving to South Carolina, Ethan worked at a Chrysler plant for 9 years. He worked for Chrysler for three years, but was a temporary part time employee the majority of the time.

Despite the miserable conditions prevailing in the southern auto plants the United Auto Workers has been rejected by autoworkers at foreign transplants in a series of union representation votes based on the UAW's record of betrayal and collaboration with management. The most recent example was a 63 percent to 37 percent rejection vote at the Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi.

Over the past decades the UAW has presided over the elimination of hundreds of thousands of jobs and than steady erosion of wages and conditions, including the expanded use of temporary part-time workers earning minimal wages with no benefits and no protection against arbitrary dismissal. This has gone hand in hand with the creation of multiple tier wage scales and the expanded use of contract workers.

Thus the UAW has created conditions in the plants that it organizes that are no better, in fact in some cases worse, than at the foreign transplants in the South.

Speaking of the record of the conditions in the Detroit auto plants Ethan remarked, "That was the UAW's fault. I have a bad taste in my mouth for UAW."

Suspicion and hostility toward the UAW has been intensified by the continuing revelations in the UAW corruption scandal, which shows that Fiat Chrysler management paid millions of dollars to obtain favorable contract terms and to keep UAW officials, "fat, dumb and happy."

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* spoke to Ethan about the necessity of uniting workers at the Detroit-based auto companies with autoworkers in the South through the building of rank-and-file factory committees independent and in opposition to the UAW to be genuine voice of workers in the auto plants.

Ethan was enthusiastic. "We need some sort of representation."

To contact the WSWS and the