

“You work so hard and you can barely make ends meet”

Hundreds of Detroit workers line up to apply for new Fiat Chrysler jobs

By Jerry White
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Hundreds of workers lined up outside of Second Ebenezer Church on the eastside of Detroit Thursday morning for the last job fair sponsored by Fiat Chrysler and the City of Detroit. According to city officials, more than 9,000 have already registered to apply for the 4,950 hourly jobs that FCA says will be available to Detroit residents when it begins operation of a new assembly plant in the city by the end of 2020.

The long line of unemployed and underemployed workers snaking around the church rips the lid off the claims about “full employment” and the “booming economy,” endlessly peddled by the Trump administration, the Democrats and the news media. Auto parts manufacturer Dakkota, which recently announced it would hire 625 workers for a new Detroit factory that will supply Fiat Chrysler, said it has already received 16,000 applications.

While the official jobless rate in Detroit is 8.8 percent, the real figure is at least twice as high. The city’s workforce participation rate—53.4 percent—is the lowest in the nation, a symbol of the impact of decades of deindustrialization in America’s poorest big city with 39.4 percent of its residents living in poverty. In 1950, the Motor City had numerous manufacturing jobs. By 1980 the number fell to 113,000 and by 2010, it was only 20,000.

During the first Chrysler bankruptcy of 1979-1980, the corporation shut down 12 plants and wiped out 30,000 jobs in the city of Detroit alone.

Fiat Chrysler and several other transnational auto and auto components manufacturers, are now expanding operations in the city, seeking to exploit the economic desperation in the city, which once had the highest per capita income in the nation, and huge tax cuts and other subsidies offered by Democrats and Republicans on the city and state level.

Fiat Chrysler is investing \$1.6 billion to convert to previously closed engine plants on Mack Avenue into to a new assembly plant and modernize its Jefferson North Assembly Plant for production of the next-generation Jeep Grand Cherokee and other models. The tax cuts for FCA’s project could top \$422 million.

At the same time, FCA is eliminating 1,370 jobs at its factory in Belvidere, Illinois, with some of those workers uprooting their families to transfer to the new Detroit plant. Across the river from Detroit in Windsor, Ontario, Fiat Chrysler is scheduled to layoff next month an entire shift, 1,500 workers, at its huge assembly plant that builds the Chrysler Pacifica and Dodge Grand Caravan

minivans.

For decades, the United Auto Workers has promoted its “Buy American” campaign and denounced the auto companies for shifting production to lower wage countries. Since the 2009 restructuring of Chrysler and GM in particular, the UAW has been actively pursuing a policy of “in-sourcing,” i.e., slashing the wages and benefits of American workers so that transnational corporations can exploit cheap labor in the US. It is telling that one of Fiat Chrysler’s advertising tag lines is “Imported from Detroit.”

Many of those waiting to apply for work on Thursday already had jobs but said their wages were so low they could not make ends meet. A young couple, Alphonso and Tamera, stood in line carrying their young baby. “I was born and raised in Detroit, with lots of relatives in the auto plants,” Alphonso told World Socialist Web Site reporters. He said he works at a parts plant producing components for Fiat Chrysler. “It sucks that you work so hard and can hardly live. These SUVs workers are building cars that sell for \$35,000 or more but they can’t afford to buy them.”

Tamera gets paid \$10 an hour by a temp agency while she works at a small factory that supplies brake pads for the Jeep Wrangler. “In some of the suburbs you can get \$12-13 an hour in a plant, but in Detroit it’s more like \$9-10 an hour. It’s hard to pay rent or to raise a kid. We are the ones that are making them the money. They should be willing to give us something back to live decently.

“Thank god that my daughter is on Medicaid, but a lot of workers have no health care at all,” she exclaimed.

“I’m only working one day a week,” said Connie, a young part-time temporary worker at The General Motors Flint Assembly Plant, “but I’m always on call. It was good when I first hired in because I was getting work six days a week. But it’s dwindled down, especially with other workers coming off from plants that are being closed.”

Last week, GM shut its 78-year-old transmission plant in the Detroit suburb of Warren and the Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant is set to close in January 2020. Many of the displaced Detroit workers are car-pooling the 120-mile round trip to Flint each day.

“I’m getting no money in and really feeling it. GM is making billions and billions of dollars and we’re barely making ends meet. When you do have work, you’re making \$15.80 an hour, working right next to an older worker doing the same thing but

making \$31.80. The UAW gets you tickets for the amusement parks, but they don't do anything for you in the plant.

"When I first got a job at GM, I was a contract worker at the GM Tech Center working at OnStar. If you think the pay for a second-tier or temporary worker is horrible, contract workers have it even worse. We started at \$10 an hour and went up to \$11.70."

Andray, a young worker at a psychiatric hospital, said, "I've been employed most of my life. A job like this is more stability and better benefits, I'm going to take my chance and see what happens. The American Dream is gone. You don't have enough money take care of your family. Everything is going up except the wages."

Andray said he sees the terrible toll caused by economic distress at his job in a psychiatric hospital. "Some people can't come with losing their job, their home or going through a divorce. There are workers getting injured on the job and they get hooked on opioid painkillers. Once they're taking off that they go get street drugs."

Commenting on Trump's efforts to scape-goat immigrants for unemployment and low wages, Andray said, "I don't think immigrants are taking jobs from us Americans. The conditions they are living in are way worse than we are living in and they're just trying to fight to have a better life. I say, 'jump the wall, do what you have to do.' We're here and we're still struggling, so I can imagine what they are going through."

When Italian automaker Fiat took over Chrysler during the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry by the Obama administration, the company looked to expand its international operations based on lowering its labor costs below what it paid to workers at its Italian and western European plants. At the time, Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne told the United Auto Workers that US autoworkers had to accept a "culture of poverty" instead of a "culture of entitlement," like annual pay and cost-of-living increases, retiree health care benefits and more.

In the 2009 UAW contract reopener and the subsequent labor agreements in 2011 and 2015, the union did everything to abide by the auto boss's game plan, freezing real wages, eliminating COLA and overtime after eight hours, and agreeing to a vast expansion of second-tier and temporary workers, making half the wages of so-called legacy workers. As a reward, the UAW was handed control of a multi-billion-dollar retiree health care trust, billions in corporate shares and millions in illegal bribes to top UAW negotiators that were funneled through labor-management training centers.

Since 2009, FCA—which has the lowest labor costs of the three major Detroit automakers-- has invested more than \$8.2 billion in the US and hired nearly 18,000 hourly workers. Fiat Chrysler's North American operations, which include the highly lucrative Jeep SUV brand and the Dodge Ram truck, accounted for 85 percent of the company's profits last year.

"The center of gravity for the world's seventh-largest carmaker has now shifted across the Atlantic," a recent Reuters article noted. This has coincided with a savage attack on the jobs and living standards of Fiat's 58,000 workers in Italy.

In November 2011, Fiat closed its plant in Termini Imerese on the Italian island of Sicily, putting 1,600 workers at the plant, plus another 700 in connected industries, out of work on the

economically distressed island. At the time, Marchionne threatened to shift all production out of Italy unless workers accepted deep concessions, saying Fiat had to "align the Italian production system to the standards requested by the international competition."

Autoworkers at Fiat's historic Mirafiori plant in Turin, Italy, which once employed 50,000, continue to face furloughs and short workweeks while awaiting a promised new product. FCA new CEO Mike Manley is seeking a merger with Renault-Nissan to accelerate the attack on jobs and workers' wages and has hired a former Amazon executive to oversee North American operations where the company plans to push for even more concessions in the upcoming labor agreement for 44,000 US workers.

This underscores the need for autoworkers around the world to coordinate their struggles across national borders to fight the relentless assault on jobs and living standards by the global corporations. The workers who spoke with WSWS reporters instinctively agree with the fight to unify workers internationally and oppose all efforts to divide workers in the US along racial and ethnic lines.

An older worker on the job application line in Detroit said, "It's not about black or white, it's about green and class. There's no difference between the Democrats and Republicans, they all get their money from the corporate lobbyists and Amazon, GM and other corporations don't pay a penny in taxes. Trump promotes racism like a magician uses distraction on a stage to conceal what he's really doing."

Referring to the United Auto Workers union, the worker said, "I lost all respect for the UAW when all that came out about the union getting bribes through the training centers. If things don't change, there is going to be a revolt like the French Revolution."

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