

US autoworkers shut down General Motors

16 September 2019

Forty-six thousand General Motors workers walked out at midnight Sunday evening. The shutdown of 35 manufacturing facilities in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee and New York will cost GM as much as \$400 million in lost production each day.

Despite its frantic efforts to avoid a strike, the leaders of the United Auto Workers (UAW)—who have been exposed as criminally corrupt agents of the auto companies—concluded that they were not in a position to prevent a mass walkout.

The announcement of the strike was delivered at a press conference by UAW Vice President Terry Dittes. Demoralized and frightened, Dittes spoke as if he were attending a funeral.

Just the day before, the UAW had instructed its members to cross the picket lines of janitorial workers belonging to the same union. The UAW has refused to call out workers employed at Ford and Fiat-Chrysler, seeking as best they can to avoid mobilizing the full strength of autoworkers.

The shutdown of General Motors is a major escalation of the class struggle in the United States and internationally. The powerful social movement that began last year with teachers is expanding into the industrial working class. The decades-long suppression of the class struggle—ruthlessly enforced by an alliance of trade unions, corporations and the government—is breaking down.

As workers begin this fight, they must survey the battlefield and develop a strategy based on an understanding of who are their allies and who are their enemies.

Workers are confronting General Motors, the symbol of the power of American capitalism, with a market capitalization of \$55 billion. But GM is itself part of a globally-integrated auto industry, involving the labor of millions of workers all over the world.

Every struggle by workers has a political dimension, but in this case the politics are especially clear. The auto industry has, for forty years, been the target of efforts by

Democratic and Republican administrations to expand corporate profits at the expense of the working class.

Forty years ago, in 1979, the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter and a Democratic Party-controlled Congress insisted that the so-called bailout of Chrysler required massive concessions by workers and the closure of factories. This was followed soon after by the Republican Reagan administration's firing of PATCO air traffic controllers, which launched a wholesale assault on the entire working class.

In 2008, the Obama administration insisted on halving the wages of new hires as part of its restructuring of the auto industry. The mass layoffs, plant closures and pay cuts imposed under Obama led to record profits for the automakers.

In the four decades of social counter-revolution, GM, Ford and Chrysler have slashed 600,000 auto jobs, with only 158,000 jobs left. The pay of a newly hired auto worker has fallen by half.

The expansion of corporate profits through the impoverishment of workers is the basic law of the capitalist system. Profit does not fall like manna from heaven: it is extracted at the point of production from the working class. The value created by workers through the labor process is distributed to the capitalists who exploit them.

The unjust and exploitative character of this system is demonstrated by the salaries of the auto executives and the billions of dollars disbursed to investors in the form of profit.

GM CEO Mary Barra, with her annual salary of \$21.87 million, makes in a day twice what a new autoworker earns in a year. GM posted a profit of \$11.8 billion last year. It has spent more than \$10 billion on stock buybacks since 2015.

The claim that GM does not have the money to meet workers' demands for a restoration of their pay and benefits should be dismissed with contempt.

Even as workers are fighting the corporations, the government and the capitalist system as a whole, their

most determined enemy is the organization that claims to represent them—the bribed and corrupted United Auto Workers.

The UAW's endless betrayals of workers' interests has culminated in the cesspool of corruption that has engulfed the entire leadership, bribed to the tune of millions of dollars from management.

Everything workers are now fighting against, from plant closures to starvation wages and the multi-tier wage and benefit system, is the product of the concessions enforced by the UAW. To believe that this will now change is to indulge in the most dangerous illusions.

While the UAW officials were shown to have spent millions of dollars in workers' money on golf games, cigars, whiskey and prostitutes, the UAW has announced that workers will get a miserable \$250 per week in strike pay—and this only after the first full week of a strike.

GM workers face many enemies, but they also have powerful allies.

Autoworkers enjoy overwhelming support and sympathy from the working population in America. The exploitative conditions that autoworkers are fighting against are those felt by millions of workers throughout the country, who have had their pay cut and benefits destroyed, and who are treated worse than the machines they operate.

Workers at GM must call on their brothers and sisters at Ford and Fiat Chrysler to join their strike, in order to shut down the entire US auto industry and bring maximum economic and political pressure to bear on the auto bosses.

Just as importantly, workers must appeal for support from workers and youth throughout the country and around the world—support that they will readily receive.

The GM walkout is the latest stage in a global strike wave. The strike by US autoworkers is unfolding in the context of an international movement of the working class. Just last week, 8,000 GM workers went on strike in Korea, and French transit workers shut down the subways of Paris. Over the past year, auto workers in India and Mexico have waged powerful strikes. In France, Puerto Rico and Hong Kong, workers and youth have been involved in mass demonstrations in defense of their social and democratic rights.

The struggle can only succeed if it is taken out of the control of the UAW traitors. Workers must elect rank-and-file committees to organize and expand the strike.

These committees must demand:

? **A 40 percent increase in pay** to begin recovering decades of wages lost due to illegitimate concessions by the corrupt UAW and the corporations that bribed them.

? **End the tier system! Equality in the workplace!** All workers, including part-time and contract workers, must immediately be brought up to top pay and benefits.

? **Restore jobs!** Reopen Lordstown and other closed plants and rehire all laid-off and victimized workers. Stop all plant closings and layoffs!

? **Honor the retirees!** Reverse all cuts in retiree health care and pensions.

? **Democracy in the factory!** For workers' control over production, line speed and safety.

? **\$750 per week in strike pay!** The UAW, together with the AFL-CIO, controls billions of dollars in assets, which they use to fund junkets and pay six-figure salaries to thousands of executives. These resources, plundered from dues and retirement plans, must now be disbursed!

In this struggle, the Socialist Equality Party, which produces the *Autoworker Newsletter* and helps publish the *World Socialist Web Site*, pledges its full support to the workers.

The Socialist Equality Party will do everything it can to build a new militant socialist leadership in the working class. It will provide workers with the information they need to assist in the organization of their struggle, to rally support throughout the country and internationally.

We call on workers to attend our upcoming online forum, which last week drew together more than 300 workers, to discuss the strategic issues that autoworkers face as they conduct this great and critical struggle.

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