

GM layoff of 240 temps exposes UAW's bogus "pathway" to full-time positions

By Tom Hall
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General Motors began laying off 240 temporary workers Friday at its Fort Wayne Assembly Plant in northeast Indiana.

GM had been in talks with the United Auto Workers over the status of these workers, many of whom were reportedly eligible for regular positions. When UAW negotiators failed to agree to the company's terms, mindful of the explosion such a maneuver would provoke among the rank and file, the company instead chose to fire them. The company is offering to continue employing them as temporary part-time (TPT) workers, who receive smaller wages and fewer benefits.

The move exposes the bogus "pathway" to full-time status for temps under the new GM contract, a sellout forced through by the UAW after its betrayal of the 40-day nationwide strike at GM last September and October. The union sabotaged the strike by isolating it to GM, starving workers on \$250 per week strike pay and subjecting pickets to information blackouts. Meanwhile, bribed company agents such as Vance Pearson and union president Gary Jones, since forced to resign after being publicly implicated in the federal corruption probe of the UAW, worked behind closed doors with the company to enforce massive concessions.

Under the new contract, temporary workers must work for three years consecutively in order to be hired in at full-time positions. If they are laid off for more than 30 consecutive days, the clock resets and they must start over from the bottom. There is also no language limiting the proportion of the workforce GM can fill with temps. This amounts to a blank check to allow the company to begin the transition to an all-casual, highly exploited workforce.

The move also exposes the fanfare in the Detroit media at the beginning of last week over the hiring-in

of the first group of temporary workers with at least three years employment. The fulfillment of the company's contractual obligations was played up as a magnanimous and unexpected act by General Motors and Ford, and a reason for sunny optimism for temporary workers.

But at Fort Wayne, far more temporary workers were fired on Friday—240—than hired in on Monday—148. This sets the pattern for the future: a small trickle of temps hired in, with the rest strung out on a nearly unattainable "pathway" before being disposed of.

At Fiat Chrysler, whose high proportion of temporary workers gives it a considerable cost advantage over the other Detroit automakers, no significant numbers of temps were hired in on Monday. This is because the contract the UAW negotiated with them did not even include a nominal pathway, allowing FCA to keep autoworkers as temps indefinitely.

There can be no doubt that the vindictive measures at Fort Wayne are motivated, at least in part, by the fact that the plant was one of the centers of rank-and-file opposition to the contract last year. Hourly workers narrowly voted against the national agreement but given the full-court press by the UAW to ram the contract through, this official vote tally by the union was likely a significant understatement of the real levels of opposition.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* reporters outside of informational meetings before the vote, workers expressed a desire to expand their struggle across the entire industry. Many were already aware of the Silao Seven—a group of Mexican GM workers fired for supporting their striking brothers and sisters in the US. Many workers at the Ft. Wayne plant posted information about the Mexican workers on local

Facebook pages and issued statements of support for the victimized workers who make the same GM pickup model as the workers in Indiana.

In a statement to members, Rich LeTourneau, chairman of UAW Local 2209, implored the company to hire in the temporary workers as a cost-saving maneuver. If “we can't come to a temp agreement, they will be forced to hire transfers on layoff from [Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly],” which is scheduled to go down for at least a year beginning March 1, in order to fill vacancies due to retirements. Hiring the higher-seniority workers from D-HAM would be a more expensive proposition than hiring in temporaries as in-progression workers, LeTourneau argued.

LeTourneau's concern for General Motors' bottom line sums up the pro-company standpoint of the UAW. Moreover, by framing the issue as a choice between hiring temps and hiring full-time workers on layoff, he is working consciously to divide autoworkers against each other along generational lines. The UAW is essentially arguing that the company should save money by hiring in temporary workers while leaving high-seniority workers without jobs.

This demonstrates that one of the essential purposes of the contract was to drive older workers out of the plant and replace them with temps and in-progression workers. Indeed, LeTourneau's reference in his statement to 178 workers due to retire March 1 apparently refers to those workers at the plant who took buyouts under the “Special Attrition Program” in the current contract. More than 2,000 “legacy” workers are expected to leave the plants under the program.

The company has some “big decisions to make in the next 48 hours,” he added. “If they do nothing at all, they will run the risk of topping the charts on unscheduled overtime,” LeTourneau complained, adding that the overtime costs for higher-paid senior workers would cost the company an extra \$35 to \$45 million in 2020.

With the complicity of the UAW, GM is running its plants at full capacity and using forced overtime both to make up for lost production and as retribution for the strike.

Workers at GM's Customer Care and Aftersales (CCA) warehouse in Pontiac have told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* that their facility has been working forced overtime since the end of the strike in

October. Management told one worker that every GM parts distribution center is currently working under a similar schedule.

Another autoworker, who was recently accepted for a temporary position at the soon-to-be-idled Detroit Hamtramck plant (D-Ham), said that management had told them during their orientation that he would be working ten-hour days, seven days per week until the plant shuts down at the end of February.

The worker also pointed out that once temporary workers reported back to the plant when the plant restarts, supposedly in 2021, temporary workers will not be able to accrue enough time to be hired in as regular employees until after the 2023 contract—when the goalposts can easily be moved again.

“We went to the union hall for two days. A lot of [new hires] there had no knowledge of the UAW, and the union was telling them crap. They made it seem like the UAW was the best thing since sliced bread and not to listen to the news or read the paper.

“The UAW has [tens of millions] of GM shares,” he added. “Another thing they were saying was that the local union has control over the manpower. Then what does the management even do?”

“We should break from the UAW,” he concluded. “They've lost their luster. The union is going to go after the workers and say, ‘Shut up and take it.’ Now management doesn't want to deal with you because the union will deal with you for them.

“I think we should be global, that's the only way to fight these global companies. They have plants everywhere. Why shouldn't the workers rally?”

These mass layoffs underscore the need for workers to build rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the corrupt UAW, to begin a fight against job cutting and the consequences of the 2019 sellout agreements.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>