

UAW strikes at General Motors

Ever since West Virginia teachers and staff won their stunning victory against a state government coming after their health insurance in March 2018, this country has witnessed a series of strikes marked by a kind of boldness and combativeness that hasn't been seen for a generation. Teacher strikes in Oklahoma, Arizona, and Los Angeles that won large pay increases; a two month-long strike at Marriott hotels in eight different cities in late 2018 that won double-digit raises; Google employee walkouts protesting workplace sexual misconduct in late 2018; a victorious strike at the Stop and Shop retail chain that closed down hundreds of stores in New England for 11 days in April 2019. And now General Motors.

Involving 49,000 workers and about to enter its second week as we go to press, the nationwide strike at the automaker — which was the historic birthplace of the most militant labor movement in the US during the 1930s — is an unmistakable sign of the enduring aftershocks of West Virginia. If the GM workers win this fight, it would be even more electrifying. It would revive the strike weapon as a viable means of improving conditions for millions of private sector workers, and it would signal a long-awaited upturn in the US labor movement that had been so thoroughly destroyed in the wake of the Reagan years. Already, this strike by the very sort of workers Trump pre-

tended to represent has starkly exposed his anti-working class nature.



GM strikers on the pickets in Flint, MI

Union bureaucracy limits struggle

Regrettably, the United Automobile Workers (UAW) leadership that called the GM strike is seriously limited in its ability to lead the strike to victory. Well before the recent charges brought against current President Gary Jones and other senior UAW officials for embezzlement of union funds, it was revealed that Fiat/Chrysler America paid UAW officials millions in bribes to extract concessions in their 2011 and 2015 contract negotiations. Such outright corruption is an extreme manifestation of a fundamental problem with union bureaucracy — the layer of full-time union officials who specialize in negotiating with the employer and who don't work day to day in the workplaces they represent.

Although union officials are often themselves former militants, once they occupy top positions in the union machinery, the preservation of that machinery becomes their overriding concern. Confrontations with management are to be avoided wherever possible, to the extent

that confrontation poses any risk to the continued existence of the union. From management's perspective, such restraint on the union leadership's part is what makes unions worth tolerating: cultivating bureaucrats who can more effectively tame rank and file militancy is less costly than the alternative of a frontal assault that risks galvanizing the entire workforce.

But the union bureaucracy is also sometimes compelled to fight, for they also owe their existence to legitimacy in the eyes of the membership. Being a fundamentally democratic (albeit capitalist) institution, unions must deliver a modicum of material gains to members in order to survive, and in the process of fighting for such gains workers get a first glimpse of their collective power to transform society. That is why socialists must always side with unions against the state and the employer class.



GM workers strike and occupy in Flint, MI in the 1930s

However, even when they do call a strike, the union bureaucracy's first instinct is to settle as quickly as possible with minimal gains. To that end, they take pains to maintain tight control over the conduct of the strike and limit rank and file initiatives. This is indeed what seems to be happening in the GM strike.

First of all, it is quite possible that the strike call was motivated by a sudden need to prove the UAW leadership was not completely in the pockets of the bosses, in response to the corruption scandals that erupted in the immediate run-up to the strike. The apparent lack of preparation (e.g. no contract campaign to energize members) and haphazard organization (GM production workers were made to cross picket lines of Aramark employees in GM plants represented by UAW, who went on strike a day earlier) lends weight to this conjecture. As such the leadership cannot be trusted to see this fight through. They are not even disclosing their bargaining demands, there has been little to no official public outreach efforts, and it has been reported that handmade picket signs

are not allowed on some picket lines.

Rank and file militancy shows the way

What's remarkable is the magnificent turnout of rank and file members despite all the shortcomings of the leadership. This reflects outrage at the unprecedented aggressiveness of GM. In contract negotiations GM has demanded a less-than-inflation rate of wage growth (2%), increase in employee share of health insurance costs (from 3% to 15%), and no change in the hated two-tiered wage system (agreed to in 2007) that discriminates against new hires and temporary workers — when GM raked in \$11 billion in last year's profit alone.

There is a palpable sense that concession after concession following the Great Recession have yielded nothing but demands for yet more sacrifice on the workers' part, despite the supposed recovery of the system — a common theme running through all the recent spate of strikes. On Sep 17, GM made the vicious move of dropping strikers' health coverage. The company is clearly going for blood. Any sign of weakness on the union's part will only fuel their bloodlust.

The strike has literally become a life and death struggle. To win, initiatives at the grassroots will be crucial. Strikers must form a nationwide network of rank and file militants that can sustain action in the absence of direction from above, and if necessary, act in defiance of the leadership should it try to end the strike prematurely. They can start by organizing workplace meetings to discuss what to do next. They can set up a GM-wide

Facebook group to keep track of developments in all 52 strike sites, share tactics, etc. They can demand open bargaining. They can organize community outreach. It was rank and file activity such as these that emboldened the West Virginia teachers to defy union leaders' premature call to pull the strike, ensuring their ultimate victory. Rank and file activists at Chrysler similarly persuaded the membership to reject a terrible agreement imposed by the UAW leadership in 2015 and managed to win significant improvements to the two-tier system.



Youth Climate Strike protestors in Boston, MA

Rank and file GM workers should fight for real leadership over their strike. Their fight is too important to be left to corrupt leaders. While the strike will be won by initiative of the workers themselves, solidarity is also crucial. One positive sign is the Teamsters' pledge to honor GM's picket lines, and the fast food workers and other supporters delivering sandwiches, pizza, and water to the picket lines. Socialists must do everything they can to support the strikers. Initiatives by the Democratic Socialists of America to visit the pickets and by eco-socialists to invite strikers to speak at Green New Deal meetings are also welcome in this regard.

Kyle Chun

GM strike going into second week holding solid

On Monday September 23 as the GM strike entered its second week, Marx21 members Kyle Chun and Wonil Kim went to visit the picket line at a GM parts distribution center employing 60 workers in Rancho Cucamonga, California. The picket was held by five workers of all ages who were in high spirits and determined to stay out until their demands are met. We spoke with Marvin, a GM worker and UAW veteran of 35 years about the strike's progress.

KC: So how is bargaining going?

Marvin: Bargaining is going very slow. The union's bargaining in good faith, but the company keeps making low-ball offers, offers that are frankly embarrassing. They insist on a 2% wage growth that doesn't even keep up with inflation, whereas we used to get at least 3% on previous contracts. They offered to rehire workers at the Lordstown, Ohio plant at \$17.50 an hour. Those folks used to be paid \$24-28 an hour. That's just insulting. Aside from dangling a \$8,000 signing bonus, they aren't budging on any of our key demands. I think this is turning into a long-term battle, much as I'd like it to be otherwise.

KC: What would you say a new contract should include at the minimum?

Marvin: We just want a fair deal for everyone. GM's made \$35 billion in profits since the end of the recession. We shouldn't have to pay for our healthcare. We want a fair pension for retirees. Everybody should be paid the same: we all do the same work, no reason for newer workers to be treated unequally. We want job security. We are going to stay out here until those demands are met.

KC: Are people ready for a long-term strike? Is the strike holding strong?

Marvin: Yes. We old-timers are in it for the long haul. The longest strike I've seen lasted 67 days — that was in 1970 [*which ended in victory for UAW – KC*]. This is probably going to be the last contract for me, but I'm also doing it for the young ones. The younger workers used to take the benefits we get for granted. Now they are getting a life lesson on the importance of the union. Because nothing has ever been won without the union fighting for it. See how the company dropped them off healthcare just like that? That's how much the company actually values its employees. The millennials are learning to fight for their rights. I call it on-the-job training. And they are standing strong.

KC: What about all the other plants across the country? Do you stay in touch with them?

Marvin: Yes we do. They are all solidly out.

KC: GM's made the unusual move of dropping strikers from their healthcare coverage. How's that affecting people?

Marvin: It's not unusual for them to cut off healthcare during a

strike. What's unusual is that this time, they did it right from the start instead of waiting until the end of the month covered by the expiring contract. UAW has stepped in to provide coverage for about 90% of members. But that still doesn't include dental and vision.

KC: What else do you think GM might do? Are you concerned they'll try to send in replacement workers?

Marvin: Not for now. Managers are trying to do our work, without much success. There are about 50 to 60 trailers idling in there, still waiting to be loaded. GM's got to pay each trucker \$500 per day for each day they have to wait in excess of 3 days.



Bernie Sanders at GM picket in Detroit, MI

WK: Is the union making community outreach efforts? What kind of solidarity are you getting?



Joe Biden addresses strikers in Kansas City

Marvin: Oh, we've been getting a lot of solidarity. The National Nurses United is helping to picket the distribution center at Fontana, the UAW locals at Ford and Chrysler are also offering support, even Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren walked our picket lines out there in the East... The truckers we are blocking and even the police are sympathetic to some extent. The

public mood has definitely changed from the last time we were on strike. *[As if to underscore the point, virtually every truck passing by the picketed gate honked in support, as well as a good many motorists – KC]*

KC: How would you compare this strike to the one in 2007?

Marvin: Well we've already lasted longer, didn't we? One difference is that the union's tactics are less aggressive this time. We're not throwing drivers off their trucks when they cross our pickets. Instead we block them for just 20 minutes, because if we hold them up any longer that's against the law. We are playing it real nice and gentle.

KC: Do you think maybe you would get more aggressive going forward?

Marvin: I'll tell you when things will get really aggressive: it's if

come next week, people don't see their September paycheck in the mail. That's when people are going to get really mad.

WK: How do you feel about the way your fight is being portrayed in the media?

Marvin: Some are saying we get overpaid, at \$60 an hour. That's not true. You can only get that figure if you include healthcare and other benefits, plus seniority. And healthcare is a real necessity. The jobs we do, building a car every 52 seconds, breakdown our bodies, and injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome build up over time. I'm lucky to have lasted 35 years on the job, but most can barely last 30 years.

KC: Thank you so much for your time

Kyle Chun and Wonil Kim

Students and workers strike for climate action

While the clean-up from Hurricane Dorian's devastation is still underway in the Bahamas, world leaders are set to meet in New York during the last week of September to discuss plans for meeting climate goals. Fed up with their inability to solve the world's climate crisis, students and workers across the globe are hitting back with school walk-outs and strikes.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres is calling upon leaders to come with "concrete, realistic plans to enhance their nationally determined contributions by 2020,

in line with reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 45 per cent over the next decade, and to net zero emissions by 2050."

The "Climate Action Summit" is meeting in the context of near total failure of countries to live up to their climate commitments. The earth's nations have failed to live up to the objectives they set for themselves in Paris in 2015. Carbon-dioxide emissions continue to rise, and investment into renewables has stagnated over the past few years.

This failure to make headway on the issue is in contradiction with the increasingly dire assessments climate scientists have shared over the past year. Last October the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a report which estimated that in order to keep warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius — a threshold beyond which lies unthinkable consequences to human and nonhuman life — the world must reduce its carbon emissions by 45% percent by 2030. This past May the UN Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services published a re-

port compiling data from 15,000 scientific and government sources and found that at least a million species are currently threatened with extinction due to human activity. Negative human impact can be felt in 75% of terrestrial and 66% of aquatic ecosystems.

Grassroots movements show the way forward

Faced with governments and an economic system which are unwilling or unable to make policy that matches our dire reality, social movements have taken to the streets to demand meaningful change. The Climate Action Summit has become a focal point for this activism, with environmental groups planning actions throughout the week.

The summit is bookended by two strikes, one on September 20th, three days before the summit, and the other on the 27th. The strike on the 20th has grown out of Fridays for Future, the movement of student strikes which has swept the world since last August. This movement was founded by Swedish sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg, who began skipping school last year to protest government inaction on climate change. Greta's trip across the Atlantic by boat and her arrival in New York has been the object of media attention over the past few weeks.

The September 20th strike is a broad united front around the issue of climate, with a variety of organizations involved in the actions including Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, People's Climate Movement, and 350.org. United Against Racism and Fascism, the campaign against the threat of encroaching fascism in New York, has sponsored and will be marching with the Brazilian anti-Bolsonaro contingent, drawing connections between these two evils. Building a strong anti-racist

movement now is a crucial part of tackling climate change, since we can expect more refugees coming to the US as extreme weather forces people from their homes.



Unionists march in Australia for climate action

This movement is led largely by students and young people, but major labor organizations are backing the actions. The Trade Union Conference of Britain, which represents all the major unions in the country has voted unanimously to support this action with a 30-minute work stoppage, drawing attention to workers non-compliance with current climate policy. Workers at Amazon in Seattle have also announced an act of solidarity, saying they will walk out at 11:30 on September 20th in protest of what they see as their companies inaction in the context of their climate impact. Hundreds of maritime workers in Australia will strike alongside students on the day.

Coming after the close of the Climate Action Summit is the international organization Earth Strike's call for an international strike on Friday September 27th. Earth Strike's demands include cutting carbon emissions by 50% by 2030 and achieving net zero by 2050, international and binding commitments to halt the destruc-

tion of rainforests and other wildlife habitats, and to hold corporations accountable for the greenhouse gases they produce.

Earth Strike articulates that until "the world's governments and businesses are held accountable to the people, we are refusing to participate in the system that fills their pockets."

While the organization does not have any illusions about achieving a full general strike on their first attempt, they intend to use the September 27th action as a springboard, raising awareness of their movement and building workers' confidence, eventually making larger actions possible.



Student strikers in New York

Student and worker power

These strikes mark a desperately needed turning point for the environment movement. Rather than focusing on eco-conscious consumer choices, the strikes are raising the general understanding in society about who is responsible for carbon emissions. A group of 100 companies are responsible for producing and selling almost three quarters of the world's fossil fuels. It is industry and outsized consumption by the 1% that is most responsible for climate change, not regular people eating meat or forced to drive cars to work through lack of public transport.

Coming together to strike back against the climate catastrophe is a strategic way to use our collective

power as students and workers. The growing pressure for some kind of Green New Deal — a jobs program which would mobilize large sections of the economy toward building a more environmentally sustainable society — can feed into this movement. SEIU 1199 will have a contingent on the September 20th climate demonstration in New York. The fact that major unions around the world are backing the strike illustrates the possibilities for a climate movement that can win the things we need: 100% renewable energy and a future on this planet.

As we go to publication, the 50,000 United Auto Workers at General Motors just began a strike over pay and conditions. If their struggle in the auto industry could be linked up with the student climate strike, it would be a huge step forward for the movement. Workers in carbon-intensive industries have the power to shut production down and demand well-paid, secure, and unionized jobs in a green economy, where major industries are nationalized rather than held in private hands. These were some of the demands from Belfast shipyard workers last month.

Other strategies may provide small improvements to our civilization's relation to nature, but only an approach in which workers exercise their power to build a society which values people and nature over profit has the power to build a world which could justifiably be called sustainable.

Thomas Hummel

Marx21 is a network of revolutionary socialists across the United States. We stand in the tradition of socialism from below: the idea that workers can only emancipate ourselves through our own struggles. Marx21 is connected with other like-minded socialist groups around the world in the International Socialist Tendency. Visit our website to learn more and get involved.

