

‘You have to stand for something’: GM workers speak out

written by Emma Rose
October 16, 2019



Nearly 50,000 members of the United Auto Workers are in the fifth week on their nationwide strike against General Motors. Key issues for the union include ending the company’s use of tiered wage plans that pay less to new hires; ending the company’s reliance on temporary workers and creating permanent jobs for thousands of long-term temps; and pushing back GM’s attempt to saddle workers

with more health care costs.

<https://www.facebook.com/strugglelalucha/videos/518688925563913/>

Struggle-La Lucha visited UAW members in White Marsh, Md., northeast of Baltimore. Over 250 workers were forced to retire or relocate to out-of-state plants when GM ceased production at the 19-year-old White Marsh plant in May 2019. Today a handful of workers who remain employed at the plant are walking the picket line, along with forced retirees.

Sylvia Heith, former GM worker and UAW member:

GM always wants to take so much from the worker, and without the workers, GM wouldn't have a product. We work hard for this product. This GM here in Baltimore has been here a long time and we fought to keep it here and they're taking that. So eventually you have to stand for something.

It's been generations of families here that have given and given and given and it's time to stop. We all have to stand together. We are a union and the purpose of having a union is solidarity.

Carlos Hernandez, former White Marsh worker, retired due to shutdown

I didn't see my children grow up because I had to transfer from Tarrytown, N.Y., to Maryland. It's tough to live apart from your family. Tarrytown is about three hours away. Every week, I would drive three hours back and forth.

I hope the strike will convince GM to keep this product here and appreciate people's work more. I want to work, that's the thing. I just want fairness, job opportunities and job security.

Guy White, shop chairperson of UAW Local 239

I'm proud to say that we're standing up for social justice. Our biggest issue is GM's treatment of temporary workers. Take that issue out of these contract negotiations and we're back to work. I went to a conference a year and a half ago and they had the UAW from Ford, Chrysler and General Motors all under the same roof. They said, "Write down your top three issues and turn them in." And by far the top issue concerning everybody in the Big Three were temporary workers. We wanted to do away with temporary workers or at least get some kind of justice for them.

The temporary worker stands right next to someone performing the same job and makes roughly half as much money. ... And the thing is, they're not technically temporary. I call them permanent temps because they've been here two or three years. It's a crock. How do you say that they're temporary? Hiring temporary workers is a mechanism for cheap labor. It's a way that GM and the Big Three can reduce their labor costs. And that's what they do.

As a committee person here and as a shop chairman, you know a lot of members think a grievance will solve everything. And you know a grievance doesn't. Filing grievances is one tactic, but hitting their pocket is what grabs GM's whole and undivided attention. When I would write grievances, I would always tie money to it. I had a manager who asked, "Why do you do that?" I said, "To get your attention." If I just write it on the principle of the issue, then nothing will happen. I gotta put money on it or else he won't pay attention.

SLL: *Last November, the White Marsh plant was put on unallocated status. In May, everybody was informed that they'd be laid off.*

GM doesn't want to call it a shutdown. "Unallocated" means the plant is "idle." The verbiage in our contract says that they won't close, idle or shut down the plant. The contract with GM basically says we'll be building a product for the duration of the contract and GM violated that. In my opinion, we should have struck back when they made the announcement because we had some leverage since they wanted these

transmissions for one of their cash cows — Flint Assembly and Arlington are their two big, big cash cows and we could have shut Flint down.

We made heavy duty truck transmissions. Allison A-1000 transmission. This automatic transmission is the only option you have for heavy duty pickup trucks. It's the benchmark for the industry. It's a bullet-proof, heavy-duty truck transmission. We also made electric motors.

In May, we had 250-260 hourly workers. And now there's seven of us. The reason the seven of us are here is so they can say they didn't close. I firmly believe that's the only reason we're here.

The option of job transfers has always been in our national agreement and we knew that would be an option for members to transfer to other facilities. We knew that was there, but here's the thing: every contract there are signing bonuses involved, there are special attritional packages for members, there's lots of things that come up in contract negotiations, and if you know what those things are, that might weigh your decision of what you want to do.

So, If GM truly valued their workers, it would have waited until the contract was up, let the workers stay on layoff status and then get a deal hammered out so the workers could see what's in the new contract and make their decision. If we're done here, then I'll retire or I'll voluntarily transfer to wherever. But GM didn't do that. GM wanted to be able to say it placed everybody in a job and that's what it did. White Marsh was the last plant to place people and GM was placing people just two weeks before the expiration of the contract. Some of these other plants don't even need workers. GM was placing workers there just for the sake of it.

We have this whole group that were hired here in 1994. They're typically in their 50s. They're assemblers, that's what they've done for the past 25 years. At the beginning of their career, they were temporary, so that time didn't count. But they

lost that time, so what do you do when you're 50 and the only thing you know how to do is be an assembler? It's too much to give up. You're put in a position where you've got to relocate.

It's just a bad deal and if they would have let these people wait until we had a new agreement, then at least you're armed with some new information and you can make a better decision.

SLL: *GM CEO Mary Berra made \$22 million last year. Do you think that GM has the resources to meet UAW's demands?*

GW: It's not just Mary Berra. She makes almost \$23 million per year counting any other stock options she has. When you look at the next level of corporate officer, they make in the tens of millions — \$16 million, \$18 million. When you look at the next level, they make single digits of millions — \$7, \$8, \$9 million. For every dollar the average auto worker makes at GM, Mary Berra is making \$280. To me that's just obscene. What justifies that?

Now where the Burnie Highway [Baltimore] assembly plant once stood—3,000 good-paying jobs—there's an Amazon warehouse where the average person is making \$15 per hour and there's a light that goes off that warns them if they're not packing fast enough and another light that goes off if you're in jeopardy of termination. It's crazy.

We've had random people come by and hand us a case of water out the window of their car. We've had people stop by and drop food off. We had a mother with a toddler and a newborn come out and walk the picket line. We've had tremendous support from other unions. Maybe something like this is what needs to happen to mobilize labor.

GM operations in Maryland

- Background about “unallocating” White Marsh plant
 - 250+ workers
 - Workers had to decide whether to transfer or retire without knowing the content of their new contract
 - 19-year-old plant with high production
 - 7 workers left so GM can claim plant is not idle
- Shutdown of Burnie Highway plant
 - 3,000 jobs
 - Workers had to transfer then too
 - Now site of Amazon warehouse
- Temporary workers
 - 7-9 years at Burnie Highway, 2-3 years at White Marsh
 - Don’t earn credit toward pension/retirement while temporary
 - Made roughly one-half of what permanent workers doing the same job were making

Sharon Black and Leon Koufax contributed to this article.

