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# **When the auto workers went on strike in 1970: Revolutionary implications of the GM strike**

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GM strikers in Detroit, September 1970.

*The last major auto strike in the U.S. started on September 15, 1970, when 400,000 workers at 145 factories walked off the job at GM — then the largest corporation in the world — for 67 days.*

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When a few dozen workers in a sweatshop first take fate in their hands and embark upon a strike, they have to go through a revolution in their own spirits; they have to take a chance on losing their livelihood altogether, especially if there has been no union in their shop before, and if they do not succeed in getting recognition from their boss.

That is why it is so hard to organize the workers even on the elemental level of joining together to prevent the heel of capital from grinding them down altogether, much less organizing to overthrow imperialism and establish socialism.

When workers lose even one hour's wages, it is often too much of a sacrifice. Those who are eternally in debt, eternally paying for the washing machine, the furniture, or the family automobile, hesitate to take off a day when they are really quite ill; how do they feel when they must face a strike of weeks and possibly several months' duration? Even when the worker is fully convinced of the necessity of a strike, his or her family is not necessarily convinced equally. And not many workers are equipped to answer the natural conservatism of the family that requires to be fed.

Then there are the workers who do not want to go on strike and must be prevailed upon to do it. They must be convinced — and life being what it is under capitalism, sometimes they must be convinced in a rather summary way.

This process is repeated every day somewhere in American industry — among the garment shops, novelty and toy producers, plastics factories, in the hospitals where more than a million “non-professionals” are hideously exploited both as to wages and conditions of work, in laundries, dry cleaning centers, many small parts producers; the list is endless.

But in the great scientifically organized aggregations of capital — basic steel, auto, rubber, basic chemicals, big electronic and electrical companies, trucking, and other transportation—the workers have been unionized for over a generation. They have some of the same problems of the sweatshop worker, but they now have more power and, therefore, more confidence.

## **Rupture of the status quo**

Their strikes resemble the others in this respect: Every strike, large or small, is

potentially a revolutionary action. It is a rupture of the status quo in a way more profound than the actions of the most courageous and daring students against the police and the other instruments of imperialist oppression.

Whether the strike be in a sweatshop paying less than the general minimum of \$1.60 per hour or in a huge industrial plant like General Motors, where the workers make \$3.50 or more an hour and often make \$200 a week by working long days and/or coming in Saturday and Sunday, it means a sacrifice for the workers and their families.

[Note: Using the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) “inflation calculator,” these September 1970 figures are roughly equivalent to the following August 2023 wages: You would need at least \$12.53 per hour to match the buying power of the 1970 minimum wage of \$1.60. And at least \$27.41 an hour would be needed to match the \$3.50 hourly wage for unionized auto workers. Yet the federal minimum wage today is only \$7.25 per hour, and thousands of UAW workers in lower pay tiers at the Big Three automakers are making less than \$27 per hour. This shows how much our class has been thrown back in the last 53 years. — S.M.]

This sacrifice does not arise from idealism but from desperation. It is the result of a long choked-up anger at the conditions of their exploitation, often subconscious but nevertheless intractable and ultimately explosive.

### **Against one — against all!**

It is revolutionary not because of its explosive character alone but because of its objective relationship to production and to the power of the ruling class.

The stopping of any part of American industry has some connection with all American industry. Just as any little street in any town in the United States is connected by other streets, roads, and highways to every other street in every city in

the whole country, so every big and little factory is connected by mortgages, stocks, bonds, interlocking directorates, bank control and a hundred other financial devices to every other factory.

A strike against any large corporation (and particularly in the case of GM, the biggest industrial corporation in the world) calls into question the power of the kings of finance who own it and also raises the question of the power of the workers who produce all the profits. It also raises the question of government intervention because of the importance of that industry to the whole economy.

### **GM is the government**

After all, the government itself is run by those who run General Motors and the other great corporations. This means a strike in GM could provoke a crisis in government, especially because of the present weakness in the economy as a whole. The economic crisis can be further affected by the international crisis in the Far East and the Mideast — which is also the crisis of the corporations as well as their government — not to mention the immediate threat of expropriation of U.S. companies in parts of Latin America.

On the workers' side, a strike raises the question of the power of the exploited against their exploiters; the question of their will to withhold their work versus the strength of the bosses to maintain a commodity system while not producing commodities. It raises the question of solidarity within the ranks of the strikers and solidarity in the broader ranks of the whole working class. It is true, of course, that the workers ask “only” for an increased wage. It is true that the workers are by no means ready to overturn capitalist production relations when they go on strike for a raise in pay, even though the company is sometimes willing to murder them rather than yield this increase.

The workers expect to accomplish their aims entirely within the system as it is

presently constituted. This expectation is never wholly justified, however, since the workers' struggle is itself a challenge to the system.

When 345,000 workers demand even a nickel an hour more than the corporation is willing to pay, this is \$34.5 million a year. And the union is not asking for just a nickel more, but 24 cents more than GM has offered.

### **The revolutionary hunger**

The better-paid American workers, Black as well as white, eat three meals a day, which is a good deal more than half the world gets. However, the motive force of revolution is not absolute hunger but almost always arises from the hunger to get what can be gotten and what the masses of people think their exploiters owe them.

This varies from country to country and from one historical period to another. The workers at General Motors are potentially just as revolutionary as any other group of workers or peasants in the world. They only need to get a fuller understanding of their own class position and to place the revolutionists within their ranks in the position of leadership. The future crisis of U.S. imperialism will do the rest.

### **Black people and the wheel of history**

The question of the super-exploited, however, is related to the GM strike in a very intimate way, but a way that is only perceptible with an understanding of the history of U.S. Black liberation struggles. First, there are a very large number of Black people working for this company — sometimes whole plants are all Black, such as the GM foundry in Tonawanda, New York. [Note: This plant was shut down in 1984 — S.M.]

How did these Black workers get there and what is their strength against their present oppressor as compared to their strength under chattel slavery?

The 345,000 workers at GM are nearly twice the number of adult slaves in the whole state of North Carolina at the time of the Civil War. And the value of the entire cotton crop of the South was about \$200 million in 1860, while the 1969 sales of this one capitalist corporation, General Motors, were about \$24 billion—120 times as much as the whole South's product (if no allowance is made for the very great change in the dollar).

And that whole production has been entirely stopped by the workers — something the whole Union Army couldn't do to the Southern cotton crop in four years of the bloodiest war this country ever fought (in terms of U.S. lives lost).

### **Vehicle for Black vengeance**

The chattel slaves of the South, in spite of constant attempts to rebel and occasional glorious insurrections like those of Nat Turner and the attempt of Denmark Vesey, could never get together to make a united push of their own and were compelled to settle for an unreliable alliance with Northern capital — an alliance whose fate is now only too well known.

The very nature of separated plantation life determined this, rather than the ability of slaves to fight. Thousands of plantations had less than a dozen slaves, and the means of communication and transportation were slow and completely controlled by the masters. It was impossible to unite for the nationwide insurrection that was necessary.

But General Motors has brought thousands of Black workers together under one roof, so to speak, and has thus helped them to organize against the same capitalist class that betrayed them after the Civil War. It has literally summoned the Black people from the Southern countryside by a hundred mechanical eliminators of farm labor and has done almost the same thing in the North. It has thus helped them to understand their own strength and to use it. This is no credit to General Motors,



which is merely a more efficient slave master than the plantation owners — at least a hundred times more efficient.

### **The bureaucratic barrier**

There are, of course, great barriers to the revolution at General Motors, among them most prominently the bureaucratic leadership of the workers' union. The most glaring commentary on this leadership is the fact that in the 1930s, the really revolutionary organizing strikes of GM were conducted by seizing the plants and occupying them until the company gave in.

The workers were not as strong then as they are now. And hardly any Black people worked there at that time. Today, the workers are highly organized, and the Black workers are there in great numbers. Black workers in the auto industry have formed their own caucuses and, in Detroit, organized the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. They not only fight the racist bosses and union bureaucrats but are also militant in their demands for better working conditions and pay.

In the light of all this, the present strike seems rather tame. Yet, it has the potential of far surpassing the perspective of its bureaucratic leaders. The very fact that it happened at all is a testimony to that.

Generally speaking, the beginning of a strike is no time to begin criticizing the union bureaucracy, which has called it and is compelled to support it and even to extend it. But it is well worth noting that Ford and Chrysler practically dared the union to shut them down, too. (Partly because there was such an overproduction of autos last year.)

And, of course, union president Leonard Woodcock regarded that as a “provocation” and pretended not to listen. The UAW leadership has always taken the “one-at-a-time” line that they are playing off one company against the other because the



companies are “competitors” — concealing the fact that two or three big banks virtually own all of them.

Even if this were not so, however, it is often demoralizing to the workers to see others work while they are on the bricks, and for that reason alone, it is better to shut all the companies down together. But of course, the bureaucrats’ real fear is the fear of the workers’ own power and the possible confrontation with the forces that the labor-fakers themselves support — the combined corporations and their government — U.S. imperialism.

These are only some of the aspects of the GM strike — aspects which are true of most other big strikes — but they should be sufficient to show how deep is the need for the emergence of a revolutionary leadership among the rank-and-file GM workers and the U.S. working class.

*Notes by Stephen Millies.*

