

Week of  
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# THE SPARK



## GM Strike a Long Time in Coming

The current UAW strike against GM is the first national company-wide strike in auto since 2007, when there were two strikes, one lasting two days, one, six hours! This one has already lasted longer than any company-wide auto strike since 1976 when all of Ford was shut down for 28 days.

For four decades, faced with financial crises that weighed down the economy, companies pushed to increase their profits. Union leaders argued that workers could protect jobs only if they put company interests first. Many workers accepted that view. Strikes became a thing of the past.

Facing little resistance, the three American auto companies got rid of automatic annual wage increases. They stopped cost-of-living protection in the years of high inflation, and workers never made it up. They dumped the principle that every worker doing the same kind of work should have the same wage. They eliminated protection for layoffs and for short hours in a work week. They tore up the principle that every worker should have a pension after a lifetime of work. They took back our weekends from us by shredding overtime pay. These were not luxuries – they are the minimum protections needed so we can have a decent life.

These sacrifices didn't protect jobs. Plants that once had 10,000 working went down to 6,000, then 4,000, then 2,500 – all the while putting out the same number of cars or engines. Yes, there was new technology; yes, there were robots; yes, there were engineering efficiencies. Those had been paid for by the workers' labor, and the workers did not share in their benefit. Unchecked speed-up took its toll – on jobs and on health.

All this resulted from policies putting company profits before workers' needs. Company profits soared; our standard of living collapsed.

Executive pay and bonuses shot up. Four decades ago, top company executives made 20 times what the average worker made. Today, GM's Mary Barra makes 281 times as much. Stockholders and banks got so much money from stock splits and

buy-backs that they couldn't find things to spend it on. So they speculated, endangering a fragile economy already mired in speculation.

What happened in the auto industry did not stay in the auto industry. It was repeated in every other industry – from factories, to stores, to offices, to schools to city and state offices. Strikes almost disappeared from the scene.

The capitalist class multiplied its wealth exponentially. The working class fell backwards.

We shouldn't worry about what reasons lay behind the decision of UAW leaders to finally call a strike. They did it. That's what counts.

But what happens next can be up to GM workers – and Ford workers, and Chrysler workers and every other worker who understands this is a fight that involves all of us.

An interesting thing has been happening so far. Workers from Ford and Chrysler have been showing up on GM picket lines. Sometimes local union leaders organize contingents to go; sometimes workers organize their own contingents.

But there's more to a fight than just walking for some hours on a picket line. Workers need to take charge of their fight, meet when they want, decide what to do. Together, workers will invent their own ways of carrying out a strike.

They can put themselves in the room where negotiations go on. Why not? GM knows what's going on. Only the workers are kept in the dark.

GM workers can pull others along with them. Who says Ford and Chrysler workers have to wait? Together, they can make a common strike the big political issue of the day, just like the Flint sit-down strike was the big issue, shutting down much of the industrial Midwest.

If a contract offer comes in that ignores workers' needs, it will be necessary to organize a rejection. If this strike goes on, it will be necessary for workers to act so time doesn't take its toll. Either way, workers can control the strike, and make it their own.