

UAW strike opens option of coalition

Environmentalists and students are actively aiding the United Auto Workers union in their strike against General Motors. The strike, which began September 15, 1970, has idled approximately 350,000 auto workers as GM plants have been shut down across the U.S. and Canada.

The strike is directed against the largest corporation in the world. General Motors is the quintessence of the modern multi-national corporation with an annual gross income larger than that of West Germany, Japan, or Canada—a gross annual income larger than all but four countries in the world. Questions of corporate responsibility (or lack thereof) must begin with a critical examination of General Motors.

General Motors is the largest producer of internal combustion engines. Motor vehicles pour into the nation's air over 90 percent of all the carbon monoxide pollution, 60 percent of the hydrocarbons, 50 percent of the oxides of nitrogen, and virtually all of the lead. General Motors vehicles alone emit 45 million tons of contaminants a year. The history of the auto industries' response on air pollution is similar to their response to auto safety: first, they refuse to recognize the social harm caused by their products; then, when forced by government regulation, they delay, defend themselves, and establish a half-hearted commitment; and most important, they informally ban competition within the industry on public interest matters.

A striking indication of General Motors' misplaced priorities is the fact that the company has spent \$60 million over the past three years on pollution control devices, as compared to \$240 million spent on advertising for 1967 alone.

Furthermore, General Motors operates some of the most polluted in-plant workplaces in the country. Its workers spend their days on fast-moving, nerve-straining assembly lines. The plants are filled with deafening noises, hot air blasts, and the fumes and dusts of toxic chemicals. Many complaints and grievances have been raised about the unhealthy and unsafe working conditions in GM plants, but management has continually refused even to establish labor-management safety committees to discuss the problems. In the current strike, working conditions play a significant role in the dispute.

The policy of the UAW is to negotiate agreements on two levels—a master

contract is bargained with each of the major automobile corporations, and a local contract is bargained by each UAW bargaining unit. In previous years, the master agreements have been bargained and concluded before the local issues were approached. This year for the first time, GM and the UAW have decided to settle the local contracts before the master can be concluded—which means that many of the deadlocks in the strike are over local issues.

There are about 32,000 local demands still unresolved. Many of these relate to working conditions. For example, at the Buick plant in Flint, Michigan, the union is demanding an exhaust system to dispose of the dust from the tool grinder in the lathe department. In Cleveland, Ohio, local demands are for more safety equipment and protective clothing. One officer from Local 45 in Cleveland says that local issues are "the same old story—working conditions and safety problems. The company never changes: production always comes first."

Environmentalists and students are also seeking a coalition with the strikers because the UAW is the only organization in the world that can bring General Motors to a standstill. Initially, the UAW placed on the national bargaining table a demand to abolish the internal combustion engine. An alliance can be built during the strike, so that after the strike joint action can be taken on the environment.

In five states, students and environmentalists have begun active support for the strike. In Chicago, Paul Booth of Campaign Against Pollution is coordinating Auto Workers Days at Loyola College, Northwestern University, University of Chicago, and other city schools. On these days, rank-and-file workers will go into classes and lecture students about the strike issues.

In Los Angeles, Jim Kosik is coordinating strike support activities on several fronts. The Free Clinic has opened its facilities to strikers and the UCLA medical school is providing free medical and dental care. In addition, 36 legal centers have been established to counsel strikers on evictions, foreclosures, and possibilities for welfare. An Educational Forum will be held on the UCLA campus to sensitize students to the issues.

In New Jersey, Zeke Saidman is arranging for student participation in strike information classes and organizing token picketing amongst students.

In Michigan and Indiana, strike support activity is just getting under way. Student committees are being set up by Dick Stober in Lansing, Bruce Ladeck in Ann Arbor, Kathy McComsey at Wayne State, and Leonard Farber at Oakland University.

On a national level, student strike support is being coordinated by Carl Wagner of the Alliance for Labor Action (666 11th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.) The strategy is to build structures in which students can play useful roles when they get sensitized and mobilized to help. In addition to providing legal and medical assistance, there will soon be a great need for students to do fund-raising and food-raising for the strikers. Anyone who is interested in assisting should contact any of the city coordinators listed above, or Carl Wagner in Washington.

With a \$50,000 budget to mobilize student strike support across the nation, Mr. Wagner says, "We're under no illusions that students will be decisive in the strike, but we hope to show blue-collar workers that students can be a disciplined force on an issue that matters to labor."

Kathy Stone

"I think it is absolutely ridiculous for 100,000 Americans living in the same urban center to try to go to the same place for the same purpose at the same time, as each drives a ton and a half of metal with him. I just think that is utterly stupid from an economic point of view and from a human point of view."

—Walter Reuther, the late president of the United Auto Workers.
