

LABOR DISPATCH

# Record Profits, Paltry Contracts Fire Up Chicago-Area Autoworkers to Strike

“It’s not fair that [CEOs are] bringing home these millions of dollars and have so many summer homes ... and we’re living paycheck to paycheck.”

MAIA MCDONALD

SEPTEMBER 25, 2023



Autoworkers at General Motors Parts Distribution Center in Bolingbrook, Ill., pose for a picture on September 24, their third day out on the UAW's "stand-up strike" against the Big Three.

PHOTO BY MAIA MCDONALD

BOLINGBROOK, ILL.—Mary Greene, a second-generation General Motors worker who’s been at GM’s Chicago Parts Distribution Center since 2013, jumps up to cheer and dance with her “UAW—On Strike” sign as cars and freight trucks drive by. Greene tries to say, “Thank you!” or lift her hand in acknowledgment to every passing supporter who raises a fist or honks in solidarity.

This Sunday, on a winding stretch of Remington Blvd. opposite a quiet pond surrounded by factories and warehouses, a handful of members of United Auto Workers Local 2114 picketed. Workers at the Bolingbrook warehouse have been on strike since Friday after being among the more than 5,000 United Auto Workers members at 38 parts distribution centers tapped by UAW President Shawn Fain to walk off the job in the union’s fight for a new contract with better pay, increased retiree benefits and other demands.



Members of United Auto Workers Local 2114 strike outside the Bolingbrook, Ill.-based General Motors parts distribution center

PHOTO BY MAIA MCDONALD

The UAW’s “stand-up strike” strategy involves union leaders selecting small numbers of local unions to strike at a time, as opposed to calling for a nationwide strike as they work toward a new contract with

“The Big Three” auto manufacturers—Ford, General Motors and Stellantis.

Greene, a parts technician who also walked out alongside her coworkers in 2019 during the nationwide General Motors strike, when 46,000 GM autoworkers struck for over a month, says that this time around, she’s hoping for a better, quicker outcome.

“I hope it doesn’t go as long as the last one did,” Greene says. “It was 40 days and 40 nights, so it was long, and it was starting to get miserable in the middle of October, you know, starting to get cold and stuff.”

Greene is hoping for cost-of-living adjustments, better benefits and wage increases. She says that, like many of her union comrades, she lives paycheck to paycheck and has required surgeries in the past due to the job’s physical demands.



Mary Greene, a parts technician at GM's Chicago Parts Distribution Center in Bolingbrook, Ill., takes a breather on the UAW picket line on Sept. 24, 2023.

PHOTO BY MAIA MCDONALD

Multiple members of UAW Local 2114, like Greene, say that while their local management largely hasn't been difficult to work with, it's General Motors higher-ups making record profits amid declining hourly wages and other issues that are problems.

"It's not fair that they're bringing home these millions of dollars and have so many summer homes and everything else, and we're living paycheck to paycheck to try just to try and make ends meet," Greene said. "I mean, that's how I am. I mean, I get paid, and my check's gone if I pay my bills."



One of the youngest strikers on Sunday was four-year-old Colton Watson, who came with his grandmother Arden Martins, who's been working at the Bolingbrook warehouse for about a year. His refrain, "Show me the money," was popular among the other strikers.

PHOTO BY MAIA MCDONALD

Local 2114 worker Eduardo Rodriguez, who was unhappy with the outcome of the 2019 strike, hopes for both a swift resolution and higher wages. Rodriguez, 44, says he left a career as an insurance broker to work at the warehouse at a starting salary of \$17.85 an hour. In five years, he says, he hasn't seen a raise. Higher pay would mean he could pay for his children to go to college and not have to pick between buying groceries or paying bills.



General Motors worker Cody Kowalczyk pickets outside the Chicago Parts Distribution Center in Bolingbrook, Ill., on Sept. 24, 2023.

PHOTO BY MAIA MCDONALD

Cody Kowalczyk, 30, who's worked at the warehouse for ten years, hopes adjustments can be made to the warehouse's "two-tier" system, in which new hires are on a lower pay scale than other workers who may perform the same jobs but have worked at the company for longer.

James Suchy started at the warehouse earning around \$3 an hour in 1976, a year after graduating high school. Now making around \$26 an hour, he says it's a shame that he and other autoworkers have had to strike in order to have their demands heard.

"We come here pretty much every day and put in the work, and we've given up concessions and stuff in the past," Suchy says, referring to deals the union struck with the company in 2009 during the auto industry crisis. "We've given up some things, and once you give up something, you don't get it back unless you get it negotiated down the line."



Mondelēz International Chicago Bakery worker Dan Fein, 78, a member of the BCTWGM union, joins the picket line in Bolingbrook, Ill., in solidarity with UAW workers on Sept. 24, 2023.

PHOTO BY MAIA MCDONALD

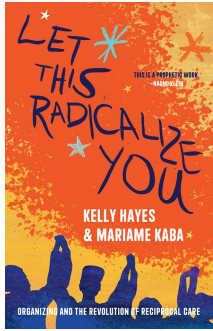
The UAW Local 2114 members enjoyed a modest set-up of tents, lawn chairs and coolers with cold drinks as they took part in their noon-6 p.m. strike shifts. R&B music from online radio station 95.1 FM Chicago played while workers enjoyed barbecued hot dogs (made by fellow UAW Local 2114 strikers down the road), chips and other snacks provided by supporters, including solidarity strikers from other unions.

Dan Fein, a 78-year-old worker at the Mondelēz International Chicago Bakery and a member of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union, came out to Bolingbrook to join the picket line. As a longtime union worker, Fein believes it's important for non-UAW workers to help the "Stand-Up Strike" be successful through strong numbers.

"I've tried to build solidarity on the job to get workers to recognize that we're all part of the labor movement," Fein said. "One of the things I talked about is the necessity to build [a] Labor Party based on the unions, because the Democrats and Republicans both represent the capitalists and the billionaires. So, I think that labor solidarity is the only power workers have because the capitalists have

all the money. They've got the government on their side. We've just got each other, and we stick together. That's the power that the working class has."

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