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Michael Westfall

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Things Changing in Flint and Not Always for the Better

Abstract

This article is part of the collection of writings of Mike (Marshall) Westfall, retired autoworker from General Motors in Flint, Michigan (1964-1994) and activist critic of the auto industry restructuring that led to devastating job losses. It originally appeared online in *The Westfall Papers*.

[<http://michaelwestfall.tripod.com/id78.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]

Things Changing In Flint And Not Always For The Better

7/7/85 Flint Journal
BY MIKE WESTFALL

Significant automotive changes are occurring in the General Motors town of Flint We see it with GM's race to export SO many of our domestic jobs to foreign workers. Who in many cases are being exploited with low wages.

Some of the wage earners Flint autoworkers are competing with are the Mexican "Maquila" workers. Who make about 72 cents per hour producing components for cars and trucks built In Flint.

GM has 13 Mexican plants, and In GM's "Maquila" plants there is an Incredible yearly labor turnover rate of 90 percent because these workers are treated so pitifully that they can not even afford the bus fare, lunch money, and clothing costs associated With working for GM.

A FEW WEEKS AGO I personally questioned Roger Smith, General Motors chairman of the board, at the annual stockholders' meeting In Detroit about this exploitation. The best response Mr. Smith could come up with was that he didn't consider these foreign workers as being exploited and that GM was now furnishing some of these hungry workers with the "special" benefit of one meal per day.

We also see the restructuring of GM through Job displacing new automation. GM didn't spend \$7½ billion for Electronic Data Systems and Hughes Aircraft for an effort in futility. Both of these fantastic high technology companies along with GM's new GMF robotics company, which is now the U.S. leader In robotics, and the many other high technology companies GM has recently acquired, translate into the reality that GM intends to automate away the jobs it can't export away. If this isn't addressed then the GM of the 2000's will be but a shadow of what it is today.

The next GM strategy is to wage a corporate property-tax reduction war with at least 20 Michigan cities. GM is using corporate pressure to transfer its fair and equitable share of property taxes onto the backs of the other community taxpayers, like small businesses and homeowners.

GM'S QUIET THREAT of future regional unemployment unless communities cave in to the "General's" every wish has proved to be an Incredibly powerful political weapon in all of GM's restructuring strategies.

Ralph Nader has been doing important work on behalf of Flint and other communities victimized by GM's tax-reduction scam, and everyone who pays taxes in Flint should be appreciative of Nader's concern and effort Jim Musselman, of Nader's Washington staff, has been working closely with my committee on this and other GM issues and Nader has accepted our invitation to come to Flint to lead the crusade for a more socially responsible General Motors.

Saturn, GM's blueprint for the future, has become the most sought-after Industrial project In America. In Saturn and other GM factories of the future, GM wants to alter radically or wipe out existing union work rules, classifications, and many other contractual matters. These include rights that have taken unions decades of negotiations to achieve. If lost, they possibly never will be regained. This is the same exact attitude that GM had before there were unions. It would be surprising if workers didn't quickly tire of this backwards system.

GM WOULDN'T ATTEMPT to redefine the definition of union, would it? Of course, GM would, and has already spent a lot of money and resources to attempt such a change.

To some it could suggest a return to the days when corporations maximized work and minimized pay, and benefits, and the standard of living of the entire nation was proportionately lower. Now, no one in his right mind would be against progress; but whose definition of progress are we blindly going to subscribe to?

What General Motors owes to cities like Flint is significantly more than it has ever or will ever repay.

In a letter to Roger Smith voicing many concerns for our next generation of workers, I have requested an immediate comprehensive Impact study that would disclose projected details of GM's restructuring, its likely impact on communities like Flint, what consequences could be expected, and any alternatives. To date, Mr. Smith has not answered.

WE ALL ARE BEING profoundly impacted by GM's power, and what we see happening today is just a down payment on the future social bill. Our children will pay the payments on this bill. Today we see the next generation of Flint autoworkers who have just graduated and are looking for meaningful employment to make a contribution to our system as well as their own economic well-being. But they are finding that GM has shortchanged them and systematically restructured away their future.

Mike Westfall heads the Westfall Awareness Committee, the purpose of which is to keep GM employees and the public aware of GM labor strategies.