

Recent Detroit area rallies, future events & activities

There were four "Manufacture American" rallies in the Detroit area on Monday, May 11, in Dearborn, Hamtramck, Sterling Heights and Pontiac. The Steelworkers organized a bus tour of more than 30 cities, to drive home the point that manufacturing and the U.S. auto industry are vital to America and to speak out against current U.S. trade policies. I attended the Hamtramck and Sterling Heights rallies. Steelworkers President Leo Gerard said that we are not against workers in countries where U.S. corporations have set up plants but oppose the corporations that have chosen to whipsaw workers in one country against another and are destroying the U.S. manufacturing base.

I think there are some problems with the campaign as it is formulated, but I respect the fact that the Steelworkers are trying to differentiate themselves and their campaign from the chauvanistic "Buy American" slogan. Clearly many of the politicians don't get the difference. I also think that if the Steelworkers raised ideas like heavily taxing capital when it makes foreign investments that would reinforce the point that they are focusing on the corporations. However they are involved in an alliance with some manufacturers. (The May issue of Labor Notes has a solid 4-page special section on "Buy American." See <http://www.labornotes.org>)

Back to the rallies: There were about 300-400 who attended the Hamtramck rally, including a number of workers and retirees from AAM. Other attendees included steelworkers, longtime labor activists and a number of UAW regional and local staff.

I understand the Hamtramck rally was about as large as the earlier one in Dearborn. The Hamtramck rally featured Leo Gerard, Jessie Jackson, Danny Glover, John Conyers and Virg Bernero, the feisty mayor of Lansing, who is attempting to get other mayors to work together and oppose plant closings. These gave militant speeches that talked about the need for single-payer health care and the necessity for a strong manufacturing base and decent jobs. Speakers such as Senators Debby Stabenow and Sander Levin gave less militant, but still populist, talks. For example, Stabenow talked about "universal health care" and when some in the crowd (like me) shouted out "single payer health care" she stopped and added, "and maybe single payer." Levin began his speech by mentioning that as a young man he'd worked at Dodge Main.

There was no call to action, but the fact that the Steelworkers were holding rallies in areas threatened with plant closures was an important initiative. In fact, the UAW was forced to support the rallies, organizing a retiree bus and turning out staffers. Region 1 Director Joe Peters was on the platform in both Hamtramck and Sterling Heights and I understand that UAW Vice President Bob King was in the crowd at all three rallies. It was great to see rank-and-file autoworkers and steelworkers!

The Sterling Heights rally was about 600. I'd estimate that two-thirds of those were from Chrysler's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant or their family members. UAW Local 1700 members are on lay off and the plant is slated to be closed next year. The local leadership had mobilized the membership through text messages and email.

The platform had more politicians, who gave more conservative speeches than in Hamtramck. For example, Senator Levin talked about how we ought to be able to build all the vehicles needed for war where as I thought I'd remembered an antiwar comment by one of the speakers in Hamtramck. The Steelworker rep who organized the rallies was standing next to me, and goaned while Levin was giving his jingoistic and militarist rap.

The last speaker at the Sterling Heights rally was UAW Local 1700 President Bill Parker. He spoke from the need to reverse the decision to close SHAP, discussing what that would mean not just for the workers at the plant, but for working-class communities. He pointed out that of the four Chrysler assembly plants slated to close, all had a "mirror" plant, making a similar product in another country. He stated it was not that we should begrudge workers in Canada and Mexico for having work, but aimed his criticism at Chrysler's decision.

A number of us from the autoworkercaravan (<http://www.autoworkercaravan.org/>) made our own signs, focusing on jobs, single payer health care, etc. and certainly no one demanded we carry only "official" ones.

Next up: On Saturday, May 23rd there are two meetings at Cobo, in Detroit. The first, sponsored by Joann Watson, will be at 2PM and will focus on the downsizing of AAM. (Local 235 will be shutting down in July although there will be 200 still working at the AAM plant on Holbrook. I assume they will be transferred to an amalgamated local.)

From 5-7 on May 23rd the Nation is holding a meeting at Cobo, in Detroit. We are hoping to be able to add a autoworker to the speakers list.

Monday, June 1 — There will be a rally in Lansing. (Don't have further information on this yet.)

June 14-17 — People's Summit in Detroit. <http://www.peoplessummit.org/> This is in response to a National Summit many corporate heads are holding at the Ren Cen in downtown Detroit June 15-17. Autoworkers from Toledo and St. Louis are also planning on coming to Detroit to join the "tent city" we will have in Grand Circus Park, in downtown Detroit.

In solidarity,

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