

The human cost of GM's record profits: Autoworker in Mexico speaks out after traumatic disability and dismissal

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Ernesto Tolentino, a 39-year-old autoworker in Mexico, reached out to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* to expose the nightmarish mistreatment and wrongful termination he suffered at the hands of General Motors at its assembly complex in Silao, Guanajuato.

Hoping to contribute to the global campaign of the WSWs and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) against mass layoffs in the auto sector, Tolentino said: "I know very well that by stating my case I am exposed to a lot of bad things, but I think it is time to let everyone know what this company is like and how they treat us. I am doing this for a big change."

In the past month, news headlines have cheered that "GM is crushing it right now" (*Business Insider*) and is "on the path for record earnings" (CNN), and celebrated how its share price "outperforms its peers in 2024" (CNBC).

The automaker's wealthy investors have been showered with \$16 billion in buybacks and an estimated \$500 million in annual dividends, amid the largest share price increase since the 2020 COVID-19 bailout. This obscene accumulation of wealth extracted from workers is based on cost cutting and a massive human toll.

Just last week, GM announced that it was laying off 1,000 workers, chiefly in the US, following the elimination of 1,500 jobs in its software division in August. While the US corporate-controlled parties and union apparatus pin the blame for layoffs on foreign workers, particularly in Mexico, automakers super-exploit and discard workers in Mexico just as ruthlessly as in the US and Europe.

Following a workplace injury which left him in chronic pain and needing a cane, Tolentino was fired and given a pitiful severance pay of 120,000 pesos (\$5,917) for 15 years of work and no compensation for sacrificing his physical well-being.

"These 15 years have gone to waste," he said. "For the company we workers are just a number. They do not value our effort and dedication."

On September 3, 2023, following a three-month shutdown of the entire plant, his team leader Luis Gerardo Perez announced that members would have to work four hours in each station

over the 12-hour shift, instead of the two hours they were used to. This, Perez claimed, would help them get back in rhythm.

"I was working normally until the last operation, the most difficult one, when my back and my left foot began to hurt," Tolentino said. He recounted:

When it was time for the snack, I had to take Ketorolac and Naproxen. I kept working, but the pain continued and I had to endure it until the end of the shift. I wasn't working well and stopped the line, and my team leader got angry with me. I told him that my back and my left foot were hurting, and he just told me that he would make an appointment with the medical service right away, which never came.

I could barely get on the bus and sit down, but the pain got worse. After arriving at my stop, I could hardly get off and walked home one step at a time. I told my mum how I was feeling and went to the emergency room.

He explains that he was diagnosed with lower back pain and given a cast for his foot and a two-week medical leave. Two weeks later, his pain had only worsened. After following the same routine with the doctors, they gave him a three-week extension, after which a traumatologist in November 2023 gave him stronger pills, told him to lose weight and to go back to work until he could start rehabilitation therapy.

He spent half a month working in pain until his first rehabilitation appointment. Two and a half months of rehabilitation and rest did not resolve his pain, and he was bounced around between three different traumatologists, with the last one concluding that he had a herniated disc based on an MRI.

On May 14, however, the doctors refused to extend his disability, and he was forced to return to work with a cane. "They put me on the line with a cane and everything; now I'm still with a cane. The leader of the area looked at me and said,

‘No, we can't keep you here, let's see where we can put you.’” After 20 minutes he was sent to the plant doctor, who sent him to the union office. There, they sent him to the clinic without any assistance, having to walk long distances and then getting an Uber.

The state-owned insurance agency refused to extend his disability. So, he was compelled to clock in at work every working day and then use his own money to travel to the clinic to avoid being laid off, losing about 500 pesos per day (\$25).

By June he had spent all his savings and bonuses traveling back and forth to work and the hospital, so he stayed home. The company stopped paying him and called him to the plant to tell him unceremoniously that he was being fired after 15 years at the plant for not presenting a doctor's note authorizing leave.

Asked about the role of the unions at the plant, Tolentino said he had joined the “independent” union SINTTIA that was elected into the plant to replace the hated Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) union in early 2022, but left “because they didn't want to help me with my problem.” He opted to join Coalición, a minority union affiliated to the CTM when they offered to help him, but this consisted in advising him to show up at the plant and then go to the clinic to request a medical justification each day. When he ran out of money and was fired, the union officials told him: “Well, that's your problem, you should have come and gone anyway you could. I gave you the solution and you didn't listen.”

Tolentino stressed: “The truth is that these unions are corrupt and are only in favor of the company and not the worker... GM and the companies here are in collusion with the unions and with the state insurance agency.”

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, he added, “I got sick from COVID and hospitalized. I was incapacitated for five months and hospitalized for a month. The truth is that in the work areas, there is always cooperation to help the worker or the union also cooperates; this time there was no cooperation.”

Based on his experience, Tolentino concluded: “The working hours are very long. They are 12 hours, four days per week. And they bring the workers under a lot of pressure, to the extent that they get injured because of the constant pressure. When you've been in an area for many years and you want to change, they don't allow you to do it under the pretext that there is no room for you.”

Tolentino says that the severance pay, which was not given to him until November 4, will barely be enough to cover debts he accumulated for legal, travel and other expenses. He is currently preparing a legal battle with the state insurance for a pension and might need surgery. “I am desperate. I don't know if I'm going to go back to work or not... I don't even have enough money to survive, that's why I accepted the 120,000 [pesos]”.

Several active and former GM Silao workers confirmed to the *Autoworker Newsletter* that such cases are common. A leader

of the now defunct rank-and-file group Generating Movement, which backed the GM national strike in the United States in 2019 by refusing to work overtime, noted that such wrongful terminations of injured workers were a key issue behind their efforts to kick out the CTM, but then the group was sidelined by SINTTIA with funding and training from the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center.

She explained: “I have seen many examples inside GM Silao [where] people are dismissed without any scruples after returning from work injuries that will leave them with lifelong consequences, and they are forced to resign with threats. It is barbaric what they do with the workers.”

Two of the workers who led Generating Movement, she explained, including Pilar de la Luz Torres Rosales and María Guadalupe Ibarra Ramírez were victimized in similar cases. “SINTTIA only used them and washed its hands in the end,” she said. “It never supported them or any of the other dismissed workers.”

A safe job, living wage, quality healthcare and pensions are all basic rights that cannot be secured under the capitalist profit system. As the IWA-RFC wrote in a recent statement:

The IWA-RFC rejects the “right” of the capitalists to control production to maximize profit by driving workers into the ground. Instead, we fight to realize the social rights of the working class through workers' control over production, through the transformation of the giant corporations into public utilities...

For decades, the major corporations have used global production as a wedge to pit workers in a global race to the bottom. But with an international strategy that rejects the national divisions promoted by the labor bureaucracies and national governments, workers can take the offensive and utilize globalized production to build a far more powerful, united class movement than was possible in the past.



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