

Layoffs impact Black auto workers hardest

By Chris Nisan

Special to Sentinel-Voice

ST. PAUL, MINN. (NNPA) — "I don't see Ford going under, but they are sure going to be small," said auto worker Azariah of Ford Motor Company's future in the aftermath of the company's recent announcement of massive layoffs and plant closures. Azariah, who goes by the single name, is a 20-year member of the United Auto Workers union at Ford Motor Company's Twin Cities Assembly Plant in St. Paul.

The local facility is under consideration for closure by the auto manufacturing giant, along with a number of other plants across the country. "There is a wide range of opinion among workers," said Azariah, "but the common denominator is that no one wants to see it close."

Ford announced several weeks ago that it would slash up to 30,000 jobs within the next four years and shut down 14 factories. Last week, the automaker made public the

first plant closures that included facilities in St. Louis, Atlanta, and Wixom, Michigan. In total, the proposed cuts amount to 25 percent of its North American payroll.

The Twin Cities plant was on the original short list of factories to be closed, but it dodged the bullet in this first round of shutdowns.

Confronted with steadily declining sales and profits, the two other U.S. auto manufacturers, General Motors and Daimler-Chrysler, have taken similar actions to confront the profit crunch and intensifying competition.

GM announced several months ago its intent to cut 30,000 jobs in the U.S. and Canada, cuts that amount to 17 percent of its labor force. Last week, Daimler-Chrysler said that it would eliminate 6,000 white-collar jobs, 20 percent of its administrative work force around the world.

In all, the so-called Big Three U.S. auto companies have cut or declared plans to cut almost 140,000 jobs since

2000. That is about one-third of the entire North American payroll. "This may not be the end, but it is certainly the beginning of the end of the automobile industry as we knew it," said Gary N. Chaison, a professor of industrial relations at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, in an article in *The New York Times*.

The source of the problem for the "Big Three" is the worldwide crisis of overproduction in the manufacture and sale of automobiles. The result of this has been intensifying competition and declining profit rates.

As this competition has intensified, Ford and GM in particular have lost a significant portion of the U.S. market. At the same time, automotive manufacturing monopolies based in Asia have increased their share of the U.S. market to 31 percent last year.

All together, the share of the market owned by U.S. auto companies dropped to

58.7 percent last year, according to Autodata Corp. Chrysler — which is majority-owned by German automaker Daimler — is the only U.S.-based auto manufacturing company that increased its share of the market last year, with a 4 percent gain.

Azariah explained the impact this has had on production in Ford's Twin Cities plant: "With a line speed of 50 jobs per hour and a 40-hour work week, we produce 8,000 trucks a month per shift. We have two shifts, which equal 16,000 trucks per month. Over the last two months, Ford has only sold in the area of 8,000 trucks."

In making these big job cuts and plant closures, in addition to demands for wage and benefit concessions, the auto companies have announced their intention of taking this profit crisis out on their workforce.

"These are some difficult times working people will have to go through for the next decades," said Azariah. "They are going to come after everything they think they can get."

Mark Fields, Ford's new

point person for their restructuring program euphemistically titled "The Way Forward," confirmed Azariah's predictions in comments made two weeks ago. Fields said that his goal is to put workers "in a crisis mode."

In the face of these attacks, autoworkers across the country have begun to speak out and take the first steps toward organizing resistance to the attacks. "For the first time in a long time, I see workers reaching out," said Tom Laney. Laney, who retired from Ford several years ago, worked at the Twin Cities plant for 31 years and served as president of the United Auto Workers union local 879 from 1984-87.

"Workers at Delphi have organized a national slowdown," said Laney, referring to workers at GM's auto parts subsidiary, who are currently fighting against concession demands from the company.

In order to convince union members to accept their massive concession demands, auto companies make the argument that workers should take cuts in wages, benefits, and working conditions to save the company and thus

save jobs for some. However, Laney argues, "Our job as workers is not to save the corporation, but to save these poor people on the street!"

Laney explained what he considers necessary for working people to confront the crisis: "What's happening is that they are waging a war abroad and at home against working people. The only answer for the Auto Workers union is to build connections within the union and solidarity between the union and the working people in the communities. The old idea of the labor movement was to fight for a job for everyone; I think the old idea is a good idea."

The industry's crisis is having a disproportionately negative impact on Black workers. A study recently released by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, "The Decline in African-American Representation in Unions and Auto Manufacturing, 1979-2004," presents figures that outline the sharp decline in Black employment in the auto industry.

In 1979, says the report, "2.1 percent of all African-American workers were em- (See Layoffs, Page 7)

High Court fuels debate over U.S. death penalty

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court has triggered a debate over the mix of drugs used to carry out death sentences, with the justices delaying three executions and giving hope of eleventh-hour reprieves to other inmates.

Florida and Missouri were forced to cancel executions by lethal injection this week. Prisoners in California, Maryland and other states are trying to win stays this month.

An announcement from the high court last week is giving new hope for their appeals. The justices will consider whether a Florida inmate was wrongly barred from pursuing a claim that the lethal drugs cause pain in violation of the constitutional protection against cruel and unusual punishment.

The court's eventual decision will not answer broader questions about the appropriate way for states to carry out capital punishment, although some justices have expressed concerns about lethal injection.

The justices' intervention, even on the technical matter of how inmates can challenge lethal injection, energized lawyers who de-

fend condemned prisoners.

"They are all jumping on the band wagon. They have an issue with more meat than they had before," said Kent Scheidegger, legal director of the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation, a pro-death penalty group.

"It's going to be harder to carry out an execution," he predicted. Not all inmates have received reprieves.

A Texas prisoner was executed last week after losing Supreme Court appeals. Two weeks ago, the court voted 6-3 to let Indiana execute a man despite an appeals court decision clearing the way for the prisoner to challenge lethal injection.

"Everybody's scratching their heads trying to figure out what's going on," Scheidegger said.

Douglas Berman, a law professor at Ohio State University, said the court created

"a ripple effect far beyond what they may have anticipated."

"What they've fundamentally done is guarantee that every execution is in a state of limbo and uncertainty — and led to more litigation," Berman said.

Florida probably will have significant support from other states when the appeal of inmate Clarence Hill is argued in April. Every state that has capital punishment, with the exception of Nebraska, uses lethal injection. Nebraska only uses the electric chair.

Florida was one of the last states to switch to lethal injection, ending the sole use of its electric chair, known as "Old Sparky," after the Supreme Court said in late 1999 that it would consider if the method was unconstitutional.

Lethal injection was con- (See Death Penalty, Page 14)



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