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THE FINAL WORD

Unions struggle as clout erodes

Labor Day finds workers worried about their future

BY LOUIS AGUILAR
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Thousands of rank-and-file workers will march in Detroit's Labor Day Parade today, but the holiday finds Michigan's unions struggling as much as celebrating.

Autoworkers and public school teachers are in the midst of tough contract negotiations, trying to protect wages, benefits and working conditions even as the ranks of Michigan unions dwindle, their political clout fades and their critics fault them for the state's struggling economy.

"Clearly, it is a tough time," said David Reynolds, professor at Wayne State University's Labor Studies Center. "I would compare this era to that of the late '20s and early '30s, when many began to declare unions were dead. So, really the question becomes, 'can

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Bryan Mitchell / Special to The Detroit News

Union activist Elena Herrada says workers "want decent health care and enough money to put their kids in decent schools."

THEY LIKE THEIR JOBS

Workers are wary, but they want to stay put, according to a Detroit News/WXYZ-TV poll. **5A**

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this be labor's great rebirth?"

In the past five years, tens of thousands of union workers in the state have lost their jobs, while others have seen their health care and pension benefits gutted and wages frozen or cut.

Last year, 37,000 union-represented jobs were lost in Michigan, dropping labor's active ranks to 879,000, or 20.4 percent of workers in the state, according to data from the U.S. Department of Labor. Ten years ago, unions represented 25 percent of Michigan workers. Fifty years ago, it was more than 40 percent.

"Trends that began in the 1980s are accelerating," said John Revitte, a labor professor at Michigan State University who has worked with Michigan unions for 30 years. He points to two developments: The ability of companies to move work to nonunion plants and factories inside and outside the United States, and the rise of nonunion companies in defining working standards.

The focus in Michigan is on the United Auto Workers, which is negotiating with all three Detroit automakers on new national contracts to replace pacts that expire Sept. 14. The talks have been characterized as the most critical in decades, with nothing less than the survival of the companies and the union at stake.

General Motors, Ford and Chrysler are struggling to find their footing as they lose ever more market share to lower-cost, nonunion, foreign automakers. The UAW, the largest and most influential union in the state, finds

"Unions matter because workers matter. The UAW made Michigan great."

ELENA HERRADA, union activist

itself exploring unprecedented ways to protect health care benefits and fend off more job losses.

Many rank-and-file UAW members say they don't expect much in the way of improved benefits or higher wages in the next national contract.

"We want to make sure that we will have jobs — that our talented workers still have a chance to prove ourselves," said Ralph Mayer, president of UAW Local 898, which represents Ford Motor Co. workers at a former Visteon Corp. parts plant in Rawsonville. "That's really the bottom line of what our brothers and sisters want."

But tough times for organized labor extend beyond the auto factory floor.

Revitte points to changes in the grocery industry. "It wasn't that long ago most of those workers were employed by companies such as Kroger, Farmer Jack and Meijer," he said. "Those workers are union-represented. But now you have the rise of Wal-Mart, a nonunion company that continues to grab more business while many of the union-represented stores are scaling back. "It's very difficult to set the standard of wages and benefits when you are losing market share."

Michigan's weak economy is wreaking havoc on unionized state employees. As the school year begins Tuesday, bargaining units for nearly half of the teachers in the state are still trying to hammer out contracts. Many

teachers don't know whether they'll pay increased prescription co-pays and take home less pay. The uncertainty stems from a \$1.75 billion state budget deficit that is crippling local government budgets.

At the same time, while unions continue to carry much political clout, the argument that organized labor is the cause of Michigan's economic woes is gaining traction, according to Paul Kersey, senior labor analyst for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a Midland think tank.

Under federal and state law, unions in Michigan have the authority to represent all workers in a given bargaining unit, and to collect mandatory membership dues. Kersey said Michigan should become a right-to-work state, which would prohibit unions from making membership or payment of dues or fees a condition of employment.

Long-term trends show disposable income is growing faster among workers in right-to-work states because they have a flexible work environment in which employers and employees can more easily respond to market incentives, Kersey said, resulting in lower costs, higher productivity and greater income and job growth.

"Right-to-work states now have a significant advantage over states like Michigan that continue to lose jobs and per capita income," Kersey said. "From manufacturing to construction to pro-

fessional services, there is more job creation in right-to-work states. It increases the demand for labor."

But many labor supporters say unions are being used as a scapegoat for Michigan's economic woes.

"Most workers want decent health care and enough money to put their kids in decent schools," said longtime union activist Elena Herrada. "Somehow that's framed as greed on the part of working people. That's outrageous."

Herrada's grandparents were UAW organizers in Detroit. So was her father. Her mother organized nurses.

Herrada has helped organize auto-, farm and cafeteria workers. She works with immigrant laborers at the Detroit Worker's Center/El Centro Obrero de Detroit, in the basement of a Detroit UAW local in southwest Detroit. The center works mainly with Latino immigrants on worker rights issues. "Unions matter because workers matter," Herrada said. "The UAW made Michigan great; it was the way people who didn't come from great wealth were able to progress through hard work."

"We can't forget what makes this state great."

Labor Day celebrations across the state today will honor that history, even while union members look for ways to bridge the gap between their old successes and the new global reality.

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