

UAW to cut benefits to Kentucky workers in four-year strike

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20 November 2001

The United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy has announced its intention to cut off strike pay to members of UAW Local 2036 in Henderson, Kentucky after nearly four years on strike against Accuride Corporation, a supplier of wheels for Ford and other truck manufacturers.

After repeated attempts to force through a contract that strips the 425 strikers of their past gains, the International Executive Board (IEB) of the UAW is determined to cut its losses in terms of strike benefits and deliver a final blow intended to isolate and defeat the strike.

“The union said if we didn’t accept this offer they would cut off pay and insurance and just walk away,” Ernie Walker, a striker with 25 years at Accuride, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “A lot of workers have lost their homes or like me have been forced to retire over the last four years. Now the union is forcing us to take a contract we’ve rejected several times. If we don’t ratify it they are going to dissolve the local and pack up and leave.”

The strike began in February 1998. Accuride used salaried employees and contract workers to maintain production. Then it instituted a lockout of all union workers to prevent union members from returning to work without a contract. Subsequent negotiations produced progressively worse contracts that were in turn rejected overwhelmingly by Local 2036.

The UAW leadership, headed by International President Stephen Yokich, attempted to cut off strike benefits and health insurance in the fall of 1999. But union members, led by local President Billy Robinson, fought back with protests, issued statements posted on the Internet and picketed UAW headquarters in Detroit. In May 2000 the UAW bureaucracy placed the local under an administrator. Robinson was removed but

double-strike pay was restored in an effort to soften the ranks and possibly bring the strike to a close.

However strikers refused to accept concessions and maintained their strike. Recently, the UAW ended the policy of paying double-strike benefits. At a recent meeting at UAW regional headquarters in Indianapolis, UAW Regional Director Terry Thurman told current Local 2036 President Bill Priest that on January 15, 2002, benefits would be permanently cut off. Thurman made clear what most concerned the UAW leadership: since the strike’s inception the UAW has spent \$12 million on health and strike benefits.

“They haven’t lost money as a whole,” Priest told the *Gleaner* newspaper in Henderson. The UAW strike fund totaled \$740 million in 1998 when the strike began and now tops out at \$887 million. “They just didn’t gain any money on us,” he said.

Former president Billy Robinson sees the pulling of the union charter as a way of preventing the local from airing the dispute before a union convention. “Does this put the local into such a situation that they can not have delegates at the convention ... maybe not delegates, but they cannot stop pickets,” he said.

In a statement posted on the Internet Robinson explains the UAW record of sabotaging solidarity with the strike among other auto workers and the bureaucracy’s effort to seek an accommodation with Ford, which buys Accuride parts. “After 46 months on the picket line, [the UAW leadership] stated Ford and the other truck manufacturers could not make an impression on Accuride. So they will just have to continue letting UAW members handle scab produced wheels and let the 400 or so members just go away.... Stay solid people, as this is another try at busting our solidarity.”

The UAW will try one more time to get Local 2036

strikers to accept an agreement with the company before implementing its liquidation of the local. Rank-and-file workers have expressed their anger against the stab in the back by the UAW officialdom, which they say has used threats and intimidation in an effort to break their determination.

The strikebreaking by officials at Solidarity House—the misnamed Detroit headquarters of the UAW bureaucracy—is only the latest in a long line of betrayals—including strikes at Caterpillar in the 1980s and 1990s—where the UAW sacrificed workers’ jobs and basic rights in order to establish ever closer ties to corporate management.



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