

Chrysler victimizes Detroit-area auto worker

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The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* condemn the indefinite suspension without pay of 20-year Chrysler skilled worker Alex Wassell by management. Wassell, a welder and a supporter of the Labor Notes tendency, was one of those who organized a protest last week outside the Warren Stamping facility against the implementation of the Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) by Chrysler.

Despite our profound political disagreements with the perspective advanced by Labor Notes of pressuring and “reforming” the United Auto Workers, we call for the widest possible mobilization of workers to demand Wassell’s unconditional reinstatement with no loss of pay.

The move to fire Wassell is an attempt to intimidate Chrysler workers angered by the AWS, which is being put into effect at factory after factory with the full support of the UAW. If this is allowed it will be used as a precedent to victimize any worker who dares to stand up to management and its agents in the UAW.

Under terms of the AWS the traditional 8-hour day is scrapped. It mandates 4, 10-hour shifts per week, without payment of overtime after 8 hours or on Saturdays. One crew works days Monday through Thursday. Another evenings Wednesday through Saturday; and a third works split shifts working evenings Monday and Tuesday and days Friday and Saturday.

The new work schedule has generated widespread opposition among Chrysler workers for the stress and disruption it has caused in their lives. Studies have shown that extended work hours and split shifts are detrimental to health and safety, leading to an increased likelihood of accidents both on and off the job. Further, workers are rightly incensed by the UAW’s surrender of the principle of the eight-hour day, a right that was won over decades of bitter struggle.

The AWS is already in effect at several Chrysler

plants. It is being implemented at two more plants this week, Warren Stamping and Warren Truck, located in the north Detroit suburbs.

On February 28, Wassell and several dozen other workers were involved in a protest in front of the Warren Stamping factory to oppose the implementation of the AWS.

According to Chrysler spokesperson Jodi Tinson, Wassell was fired for engaging in an activity that constituted or appeared to constitute a “conflict of interest with the company.” She added, “He released information that was not authorized relating to quality.”

The latter remark appears to allude to comments Wassell made to the *Detroit News* regarding problems with quality at the adjacent Warren Truck assembly plant and “poor morale” among the workers due to the impending implementation of the AWS. The *News*, which ran an article entitled, “Chrysler moves to silence workers,” denied that Wassell was the source of their report on quality issues.

With unmitigated arrogance, Chrysler asserts the right to discipline workers for exercising their First Amendment right to free speech. With the suspension, management is seeking to set a precedent that would establish a relationship with its workforce similar to that between feudal lords and serfs.

The UAW was opposed to the demonstration and had rejected out of hand an earlier petition circulated by workers at the plant opposing the AWS. In 2011, skilled trades workers at the factory circulated a petition challenging the UAW’s acceptance of the sellout national agreement, even though skilled tradesmen voted it down.

Among workers there is little doubt that the UAW was either tacitly or directly involved in the move to fire him. Since his suspension, the UAW has been silent. This is hardly surprising since the union has thrown its full support behind the implementation of

the AWS. In a statement to the *Detroit News* UAW Vice President General Holiefield recently praised the AWS, calling it “successful” in meeting customer demand and “creating jobs.”

The UAW, which owns billions of dollars in stock in Chrysler and General Motors, has a vested interest in boosting auto company profits, which have set new records. This is behind their support for the AWS as well as the two-tier wage system, with new-hires being brought into the auto plants at near poverty wages.

The fight against the victimization of Wassell as well as the AWS and the two-tier system cannot be taken forward through appeals to the corporatist UAW bureaucracy. It requires the mobilization of auto workers independent of and against the UAW. Rank-and-file committees must be formed in every workplace to carry forward this struggle.

Chrysler workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* condemned the suspension of Wassell. Steve, a worker at Warren Truck, told the WSWS, “It’s typical of management to suppress the labor force any way they can with intimidation, threats, suspension and firing. They are deeply invested in the A, B, C shift schedule. It allows them to get an extra 49 days of production a year that they don’t have to pay for. You are talking about 60,000 extra vehicles at \$22,000 apiece.

“I think the UAW would help fire him. They are not going to support him because he went outside the parameters of what they want done.”

Joe, a former Warren Truck worker said, “It is terrible what they did to the guy. I tell, you, I knew something like that was going to come. The union is not going to back him. The UAW has done away with solidarity. The company and the UAW are all as one. They are definitely not going to help us at all.”

David, a worker with 26 years at Sterling Stamping said, “Believe me I am pissed. It is clearly a violation of his rights as a US citizen to voice his opinions in public. I don’t want this AWS. I have worked hard for 26 years for Chrysler and now they are sticking it in our face. Our plant is next on the list.

“The union is behind it. Their outlook is every day the company’s stock goes up it is more money for them. It’s not a union anymore. It is more like a company.”



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