

One month after victimization of Alex Wassell

UAW breaks silence on Chrysler firing skilled tradesman

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5 April 2013

After more than one month of silence on the firing of 20-year veteran Chrysler skilled trades worker Alex Wassell, United Auto Workers President Bob King has indicated that the union is in talks with management over the issue.

Wassell, a supporter of the Labor Notes tendency, was one of the organizers of a protest against the newly implemented Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) outside the Chrysler Warren Stamping plant north of Detroit where he worked. In firing Wassell, management pointed to remarks the 20-year veteran worker made, reported in the *Detroit News*, citing quality issues at the neighboring Warren Truck assembly plant. Chrysler said Wassell's statements represented a "conflict of interest" with the company.

The prolonged silence by the UAW on the victimization of Wassell expressed the union's support for the firing, which was aimed at intimidating opposition to the widely hated AWS. The attack on Wassell has generated enormous anger among Chrysler workers, directed both at the company and the UAW. Workers correctly see the victimization as a fundamental violation of the right to freedom of speech. Management, with the support of the UAW, is seeking to establish a relationship with its workforce akin to that between feudal lords and serfs.

UAW President King raised the issue of Wassell in a taping Tuesday of the PBS show "Autoline Detroit," which is not to be broadcast until the weekend of May 12. He reportedly told an interviewer, "He was protesting against us, but he's got a right to protest us. That is America," adding, "We're having discussions about that now."

When King refers to "us," he is talking about the

UAW and Chrysler. The UAW has integrated itself into the structure of corporate management, proclaiming that the interests of the UAW and those of the company are identical.

The UAW supports the AWS, which scraps the normal 8-hour day and imposes 10-hour work schedules, without payment of overtime. The AWS, which has been implemented at some Ford and Chrysler plants, eliminates paid lunch breaks, while Saturday work is paid at straight time. Some workers are forced to work split shifts, rotating between days and evenings, and many are forced to work Saturday. The new schedule is highly profitable, however, allowing the auto companies to operate plants an additional 49 days per year without paying overtime.

If King is breaking his silence now, it is only because the attack on Wassell has exposed the UAW's role in imposing intolerable conditions on auto workers—including not only the implementation of the AWS, but the two-tier wage and expansion of forced overtime.

Workers report that since the AWS went into effect at the Warren Stamping plant in early March, productivity has plummeted, with confusion and disorganization on the shop floor. Management has been forced to schedule additional overtime to make up for shortfalls in output.

A Warren Stamping skilled trades worker contacted by the WSWS said, "We have been taking up a collection for Alex; the last check we sent was for \$1,050. This has been done by the workers, the union had nothing to do with it.

"The UAW waited as long as they could to say anything. It looks like now they are trying to back-

pedal to try to get in good graces with the workers.”

Auto workers should not place the slightest confidence in the UAW to fight for Wassell’s reinstatement. Outside of King’s remarks, to date the UAW has issued no formal statement on Wassell’s victimization. This is because the union is utterly hostile to any independent expression of the interests of workers. With a 41.5 percent stake in Chrysler stock through its control of the VEBA (Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association) fund, the UAW has a vested interest in helping management extract every last ounce of profit off the backs of workers.

The firing of Wassell has also exposed the subservience of *Labor Notes* to the UAW. Since the victimization, *Labor Notes* has published only one online article about the case, which doesn’t mention the role of the UAW in supporting the introduction of the AWS. The April print edition of *Labor Notes* fails to even mention the firing. *Labor Notes* advances the idea that the UAW can be reformed by pressure from the rank-and-file. In fact, the UAW is a force completely alien and hostile to the working class.

Through its massive investment portfolio, the UAW has insulated itself from the impact of its policies on workers’ lives. The income of the union apparatus has soared, even as the wages and benefits of auto workers have been slashed. According to its annual report filed with the US Labor Department, the UAW’s revenues rose to \$261 million in 2012, including some \$42 million in interest from its various investments.

While the union’s net assets fell by some \$40 million, due to the writedown of furniture and other equipment, the union reported that its holdings in treasury bonds rose from \$66 million to \$84 million, leaving it with total assets of \$1.003 billion.

In his comments on “Autoline Detroit,” King boasted about the role that the UAW has played in helping Chrysler hold down production costs, even as output has increased. As a consequence Chrysler’s profits have soared, reaching \$1.7 billion in 2012.

Auto workers must mobilize to fight for the reinstatement of Wassell with full back pay. This struggle must be carried out independently and against the UAW through the formation of rank-and-file committees in every factory. The fight against victimization must be used as the starting point for a counteroffensive by workers against the two-tier wage,

the AWS and all the attacks being carried out by the auto corporations.



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