

A revealing clash between Toledo Jeep workers and UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell

Jerry White
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If one were to believe the idealized picture of the American trade unions presented in the pages of the *Nation*, *Socialist Worker*, *Labor Notes* and similar publications, one might be forgiven for believing that the internal life of the unions consists of democratic debate led by a leadership accountable to its members.

The daily reality workers confront, however, is just the opposite. This fact was amply demonstrated last Sunday when hundreds of workers from Fiat Chrysler's Toledo Jeep Assembly Complex in Ohio confronted United Auto Workers Vice President Norwood Jewell, the chief architect of the sellout agreement with Fiat Chrysler (FCA).

While the UAW has boasted of the end to its "adversarial relationship" with the auto companies, it certainly maintains an adversarial relationship with the workers it claims to represent. The meeting and the behavior of Jewell contrasted sharply with the mutual backslapping between UAW President Dennis Williams and FCA CEO Sergio Marchionne on display when the deal was announced earlier this month.

It is rare to get documentary evidence of the arrogance and contempt top UAW executives have for workers, since figures like Williams and Jewell generally avoid workers like the plague, preferring instead to hobnob with the auto execs, Wall Street advisors and representatives of the corporate-controlled media.

Fortunately, rank-and-file workers in Toledo, Ohio used their smartphones to record the informational meeting on Sunday when they confronted Jewell, the chief architect of the sellout deal with Fiat-Chrysler (FCA). The vast majority of workers at the plant already made up their minds to vote "no" and boycotted the meeting. However, several hundred workers attended, including a large number of temporary part-time (TPTs) workers, forcing Jewell to show his real colors as one well-informed worker after another peppered him with angry questions and denunciations of the contract.

Jewell, who before the meeting told the *Detroit News* his main task in such meetings was to let workers "vent," began with a half-hour defense of the pro-company contract, telling workers that most were "misinformed" about what it contained.

(00:50 in the embedded audio file) "We might not have got everything some people believe we should have but we did what we believe was in the best interests of the membership," (2:10) he declared, sparking skeptical groans from the audience.

Jewell attempted to justify the UAW's blatant disregard of its pledge in 2011 to restore a 25 percent cap on low-paid second-tier workers, a move that would have immediately transferred 7,000 workers into the first tier, giving them a \$9 per hour raise. He cynically presented this alternative as only helping a "select group," while the union opted to defend all of its members (2:30).

Then he got down to business, insisting there is no way to abolish the hated two-tier system—the major demand of workers—because the company did not want to! Moreover, he said, the company would move out of the country if workers demanded "too much," saying that is what happened in 1999 when workers at the newly spun off Delphi company demanded the same pay they had as GM employees.

"We could not raise the top and raise everybody on the bottom all the way up to the top; we couldn't have even taken the 7,000 and moved them all the way up to the top if the top grew to \$30 an hour. We did the best we could to still keep products in this country." (3:40)

Jewell spoke as a representative of FCA, beginning not from the demands of the workers he claims to represent, but from the company's bottom line. This became even clearer when he spelled out that the UAW proposal to take over healthcare was dictated entirely by the cost-cutting needs of the automakers.

Echoing the scurrilous claims of the auto bosses, the Obama administration and the corporate-controlled media—that autoworkers receive overly generous "Cadillac" health benefits—Jewell said, "A lot of people in society don't understand we don't pay for our benefits. But the people who supply your parts pay 5 to 25 percent and sometimes more for their healthcare...The frustration here is that our membership doesn't understand that because we have never had to pay for healthcare. (5:20)

"Right now it costs the company \$8 an hour for healthcare,"

Jewell complained (6:05). “If you are making \$17 an hour, you are really making \$25 because of the cost of your healthcare. This is projected to go to \$14 if we don’t do something about it.”

The union-run co-op would “control costs” without reducing benefits or passing on costs to workers, he claimed like an insurance salesman. “Somehow it has been misconstrued in the media and people are all panicky about this co-op. (6:30) As your representative with Chrysler if we come up with a suggestion as a group that I don’t think is right for you, I have veto power,” he said to the cold comfort of workers.

The claim that healthcare costs will be curtailed without placing the burden on the backs of workers through increased copays and reduced services is simply sophistry and lies.

An eruption of sardonic applause came from the floor when Jewell acknowledged some workers “blasted me for negotiating this contract and saying I ought to be ashamed of myself.” (11:00) He claimed the membership had the last word. “We are not forcing this on you. This is a democratic society and if you turn it down we go back to the drawing board,” (12:10) he said to another eruption of applause.

However, he made clear, even if workers turned it down, the UAW would do nothing different, claiming the company, which has made billions in profits and paid its CEO Sergio Marchionne \$70 million, could not afford any more. “We might make some changes but the money is the money... (12:18) That’s the frustrating thing as I go around trying to explain this agreement. People think there is some kind of magic wand and we make the second tier disappear and take everybody to \$30 an hour.”

During the question period, a young temporary worker complained that the UAW had signed a contract language that allowed the unlimited use of TPT workers who are guaranteed only 20 hours a week and are on call with no job security. (58:00) “What incentive is there for the company to hire us when they can work us anytime they want? We are going to be treated like the old TPTs who worked for 17 years without being hired full-time. We can’t even get a second job because they can work us any day, anytime, like a full-time employee.”

Jewell replied with a trust-us response. “We’re not going to abuse TPTs, we will not let that happen,” he declared as workers shouted, “It’s already happening.”

A veteran worker took the microphone to declare, “This contract is crap,” to an explosive round of applause (see video clip above). “I’ve invested my life and my blood in this, and you guys want to give it all away without a fight.” He complained about the removal of the Jeep Cherokee model from the plant, adding to boisterous applause, “Maybe the entire UAW needs to go on strike and shut the whole country down and then we’ll see what happens then.”

“If I was running for election I would have said that too, but I’m not,” Jewell said arrogantly. “I’m telling you there is not

one of us up here—and shame on you for suggesting otherwise—that has anything but the best interest of our membership in mind,” Jewell replied to howls of laughter.

“You think you are going take Sergio Marchionne and tell him how he is going to run the company, then why don’t you go ahead and be a CEO and make things happen. I’m trying to tell you we don’t have that power.”

At that point a woman worker screams out, “Are you working for us or Sergio?”

“It is wrong for you to sit there and chastise me as if I got that kind of power when you know full well I don’t. You can’t strike a company to keep a product in this city, and you know that,” he said to more boos.

The clash between Toledo Jeep workers and Jewell revealed the true relationship between the working class and the UAW. It is not an organization controlled by or answerable to workers. On the contrary, it functions as management’s industrial police force, seeking to suppress resistance to the ever-greater exploitation of workers.

The opposition expressed by FCA workers is an expression of the class conflict between workers on the one hand and the upper middle class business executives and aspiring investment managers who run the UAW.

Jewell is typical of type that moves up the ladder of the UAW bureaucracy, having organized countless sellouts of GM workers, including the betrayal of the 1999 strike, which paved the way for the spin-off of Delphi, the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and the first introduction of two-tier wages in the auto industry. Jewell earns at least \$200,000 from his combined positions on the UAW International staff, UAW Retiree Medical Benefits Trust and UAW-Chrysler joint programs. Like so many others, he also has family members on the payroll, including his son who makes \$110,000 as an “organizer.”

The UAW will not respond to the “no” vote by changing its stripes and coming back with a better contract, as various mid-level UAW officials such as Bill Parker, Gary Walkowicz, Scott Houldieson and other supporters of the Labor Notes and Autoworker Caravan groups say. Instead, it is plotting right now with the executives from FCA, GM and Ford, along with officials from the Obama administration, to find a means to crush resistance and impose another sellout agreement.

The WSWS urges autoworkers vote “no” on the contract and follow this with the formation of rank-and-file action committees, democratically elected by workers and free from the authority of the oppressive dictatorship of the UAW.



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