

# St. Louis autoworkers bar UAW vice president from their Facebook page

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23 March 2016

Rank-and-file autoworkers at the General Motors Wentzville, Missouri plant, just outside of St. Louis, barred UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada from joining their local Facebook page earlier this month. GM assembly workers on the invitation-only page voted to keep the UAW executive off their site in a poll conducted by its administrators.

The hatred for Estrada is well earned. The official, who made \$167,000 last year, plus various other fees and perks, was instrumental in ramming through last fall's sellout contract on 55,000 GM workers. The deal maintained the hated two-tier wage and benefit system, increased the use of lower-paid temps and imposed first-time-ever out-of-pocket health care costs in line with Obama's "Cadillac Tax." The UAW allowed the super-profitable company to limit wage increases to below the rate of inflation for workers who have not seen a raise in a decade.

After Fiat Chrysler workers defeated the first UAW-backed national agreement in 33 years, Estrada and UAW President Dennis Williams decided to try to rush through the UAW-GM deal before workers could study it. A vote was organized just two days after the UAW released its self-serving "highlights" and dumped 1,000 pages of contract language on the Internet.

After GM workers in Kansas City—the first to vote—overwhelmingly defeated the contract, Estrada and Williams called an emergency meeting of national and local officials and promptly told workers their plants would close and they would lose their jobs if they rejected the contract. Despite this campaign, the final vote was split, with skilled trades workers voting it down. The UAW simply ignored its own constitution—which requires ratification by both production and skilled trades workers—and pushed the contract through anyway.

In a March 13 post, a Wentzville GM worker reported that participants on the "Members of UAW Local 2250" Facebook page had voted to keep Estrada off. A minority of workers, she said, had voted to include her under the mistaken belief that this would allow the UAW to hear their concerns firsthand and make it easier for workers to get answers to their questions.

In her post, the worker replied, "No one who's seen the things the International has done to the membership in recent times should believe that they're interested in giving straight answers to questions relevant to the rank and file. Think of the track record of the UAW leadership over the last decade. Condemning future generations of UAW workers to retirement without pensions. Hollywood strikes that are guaranteed to barely put a dent in the companies' profit margins—and ensure that the concessions the International negotiates with the companies stay put. Advocating that the most important thing is to ensure the 'health of the business'—grooming workers into believing that they shouldn't put up a fight to protect their interests. Constant dipping into the strike fund. Increasing our dues when their 'representation' is making us have to work harder for less pay. Hiring a PR firm with our dues money in order to dupe people into voting Yes on the recent tentative agreements. Not staging a single significant strike or walkout last year when plant after plant reported strike votes of 90%+ in favor. And I'm leaving out the horrible rumors of what may have happened with the Ford vote," the worker said.

"The people in Dennis Williams' inner circle are not concerned with your complaints. They're concerned with getting as much for themselves as possible while negotiating as little as possible for the rank and file. (Btw, there are members of my page that've been banned from posting on the UAW International Union

page because they made the leadership uncomfortable. Do you think that a group of people who actively muzzles dissent wants to have a transparent dialogue with the workforce?)”

The Wentzville worker continued, “I think [Estrada] wants to join our page for more sinister reasons...Having the UAW heads have access to every space a UAW member expresses their opinion on is an intimidation tactic...Any international rep wanting to join the local page is aiming to monitor what people say about the UAW bureaucracy—specifically, who expresses dissent.”

The UAW is greatly concerned about the ability of workers to organize and communicate with each other on social media. At a February 5 press conference at the UAW’s Solidarity House headquarters in Detroit, union president Dennis Williams acknowledged that the UAW was “not prepared for the outside forces that attacked us on social media...” While not naming it, Williams was referring in particular to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, which exposed the lies of the UAW and the company and gave the opposition of workers a conscious and organized voice.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* was circulated and re-circulated by thousands of rank-and-file workers. Unable to answer the exposures of the newsletter, Estrada tried to slander it, claiming the Republican Right-to-Work Committee was really behind the WSWS.

Many workers have taken Williams’ comments as a warning that the UAW intends to conspire with management to stifle their free speech. A GM worker from the Lordstown GM plant, near Youngstown, Ohio, told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that the decision of the St. Louis workers was “awesome” and that they had done the “right thing.” Estrada “works for the UAW International and the moneymakers. What has she done for workers? Why should she get on their site? I bet before they denied her, she got their names off the group.

“UAW President Dennis Williams complained that the UAW was not ready for workers using social media to oppose the contracts. The truth hurts them, and they can’t contain everyone on social media. On the job you can’t utter a thing, but once you’re home on social media workers still have free speech rights. They want

to take that away.

“It’s already in the contract that you are not allowed to take pictures of the plant or videos on your smartphone. A worker at Lordstown was posting pictures and videos on his Facebook page about the conditions and the grievances the company and union ignored. They took two years to legally force him to shut down his Facebook page.

“I think the union and the company will try to put something in the next contract to keep us from using social media. They noticed all the resentment came out on social media. The real conditions inside these plants, not just GM but all plants, was open for everyone to see. It hurt them bad and caused people to turn down the contract. They never met this kind of opposition before, and they didn’t know how to handle it.

“Everybody realized they were not alone, that it was not just us but everywhere. It hit the UAW International that workers were rising up. During the votes, we took pictures of our ‘no’ votes because people felt the UAW would try to pass the contract anyway. They were pissed off and were telling people it was illegal to take photos of your ballots. We pay these people out of our paychecks, and we are paying people that we don’t trust.

“You got to hand it to social media and sites like the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* —this is what caused workers to stand their ground. People were just blowing up. The workers need an organization—not the UAW—to represent them. The UAW doesn’t represent people on the floor. We need our own organization, controlled by workers ourselves, in order to communicate with each other and protect our interests.”



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