

Two UAW officials injured in shooting near Ford Chicago Assembly Plant

Marcus Day
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Two members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 551's bargaining committee were shot and injured outside the local's union hall on Chicago's Far South Side Friday night. The shooting followed the announcement of election results for the union local, which covers over 4,200 workers at Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant.

According to the Chicago Police Department, an argument began in the parking lot of the union hall—roughly a mile south of the plant—involving Aaron “Hammer” Straker and Jeff Bacon, who had both just been reelected to the union's bargaining committee, and an unnamed third individual. That person pulled out a gun, shot each of the officials in the leg, and left the scene. The two injured officials then drove themselves to a hospital in nearby Hammond, Indiana, where they were reported to be in stable condition.

Police SWAT teams quickly arrived and put the union hall and the massive nearby factory on lockdown to search for “an active shooter.” Remarkably, as of this writing neither the UAW, Ford, nor the police have identified the assailant or indicated a motive. This is despite the fact that police quickly located a witness that had a cellphone picture of the shooter.

Workers at the plant contacted by the WSWW *Autoworker Newsletter* had not been told any details about the shooting by the union. Some thought that the attacker was possibly a former friend of one of the union officials.

On Facebook, one worker who was on shift at the plant when the shooting occurred expressed disbelief that Ford kept the line running following the incident, saying, “they still have us working, on lockdown, with the police inside the plant. Where they do that? Oh yeah, only in Chicago, I can't wait to leave this plant, they need to shut it down, too much going on in here...”

Another commented on the local's Facebook page, “Why are they not telling anyone who the shooter was? If Hammer and Bacon knew him why is it a secret?”

UAW Vice President for Ford Jimmy Settles issued a perfunctory statement Saturday, stating, “I am deeply saddened by the tragic events that took place at UAW Local 551 yesterday evening. My thoughts and prayers go out to the victims of this senseless shooting and all those affected by this act of violence. While we await the results of the police investigation, I respectfully ask that we embrace one another and unite around our brothers and sisters at UAW Local 551 and the surrounding community.”

It is not clear whether the dispute involved infighting over positions and privileges within the local UAW bureaucracy, an attack by an angry and desperate worker or some other motive. While the precise motivation for and circumstances of the shooting remain unclear, it takes place under conditions of immense social tensions inside the factory and surrounding south Chicago and Northwest Indiana neighborhoods, which have long suffered from deindustrialization, social service cuts, poverty and violence. At the same time there is deep antagonism between the workers in the Ford plant and the UAW, which is seen as a thoroughly corrupt outfit hostile to the interests of the workers it purports to represent.

Workers have repeatedly likened conditions at Chicago Assembly to a “hell,” with standing water and vermin, and temperatures in the summer causing many to regularly collapse from heat exhaustion. In January, a collapsing wall killed a contractor and critically injured another worker who rushed over to aid him.

Last fall, the union faced a near-rebellion by Ford workers against its efforts to impose yet another pro-company contract, with workers at the Chicago

Assembly Plant voting down the union-backed agreement by a margin of over 2-to-1. In the end, the UAW was able to ram through the contract—which expanded the hated two-tier system—only on the basis of lies, intimidation, and outright vote fraud.

Union reps are widely seen as indifferent to grievances of workers or openly abusive to those who speak up. Some UAW officials have been accused of engaging in or covering up sexual harassment of female workers, harkening back to the kind of brutal exploitation that prevailed in the 1930s.

In fact, the two officials who were shot—Straker and Bacon—ran on a ticket and were featured on a billboard with Alan “Coby” Millender, the UAW’s plant chairman. Millender, along with several of Ford’s managers, was named as a defendant in the class-action lawsuit in 2014 alleging widespread sexual abuse and harassment at the plant. He was briefly suspended by Ford—over the objections of Settles—and subsequently reinstated.

Since the beginning of the year, workers have faced speed-up on the line and long hours, as Local 551 officials continue to reveal the “fine print” in the pro-company contract the UAW concealed during the ratification process. One worker told the *WSWS Autoworkers Newsletter*, “We’re only supposed to have 13 mandatory overtime days in the year. We’re way over that now. We started scratching into it, and the union rep said, ‘Since it’s a new model, that [limit] doesn’t hold.’ It’s a technicality they can use. There’s a new model every year!”

In a possible oblique reference to some of the issues behind the shooting, Straker himself took to Facebook Saturday in an attempt to defend his reputation:

“I was asked why don’t I give the union stuff up. Go back to just running breakdowns, get paid more hours than what I make now and reduce my stress. My reply was, **ABSOLUTELY NOT!!!!**

“...Politics become politics and haters hate you that don’t even know you and *mostly because they are uneducated or misinformed of the processes in place and also don’t understand our responsibilities*. But, I felt this job was a calling from within. I have the ability to help individuals as well as collectively make decisions that help masses of people. I think the good lord recognizes that, or that bullet would have ended up somewhere else with a more tragic outcome. I look at

this as a sign of being blessed and a sign I am doing what the good lord wants me to do.” (emphasis added)

Regardless of whether or not divine intervention saved Mr. Straker’s life, the real attitude of the local UAW executive is revealed by his remarks: Workers are “misinformed,” or stupid, and simply fail to understand the “responsibilities” of union officials. What are these responsibilities? They are defending the profit interests of the corporations and keeping workers in line.

Last fall, UAW Vice President James Settles similarly denounced young autoworkers in particular for failing to understand “the process” because they were voting against the UAW-Ford contract in factory after factory, including Chicago Assembly Plant. According to Settles & Co., the “process” is that the UAW signs a pro-company contract and workers shut their mouths and ratify it. It is only in the months after the deal is approved that workers discover the bitter consequences.

More facts will have to be uncovered about the strange circumstances surrounding the shooting at the UAW Local 551 union hall in order to determine whether it was the result of internecine warfare within the UAW, the rash act of an incensed worker or some other motive.



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