

Opposition grows to skilled trades reorganization at Fiat Chrysler

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Fiat Chrysler, with the assistance of the United Auto Workers, is forcing through a reorganization of skilled trades work by assigning so-called minor tasks to production workers.

The program, part of FCA's Global Plant Reorganization, has been met with a firestorm of opposition from production and skilled trades workers alike. It is correctly seen as a means of eliminating skilled trades jobs, which traditionally require more training and are paid at a higher rate.

According to a memo circulating at the Jeep complex in Toledo, FCA is creating a production-based classification called "conductors" that will take the place of skilled trades workers for "fault recovery" and minor servicing tasks, such as fault resets, weld cap changes and electrical cable replacement. All this work is now done by skilled tradesmen.

A recent meeting called at the Sterling Stamping plant to explain the changes exploded in angry opposition when workers learned of the plan. Opposition has not been limited to skilled trades workers but has also embraced production workers who will be called on to perform sometimes dangerous tasks for only small amounts of additional pay.

The plan to have production workers carry out skilled trades work is the latest in a series of attacks on skilled trades workers. It follows schemes for the "cross training" of skilled tradesmen to allow them to work outside their areas of expertise. Such practices put workers in the position of performing work for which they are not adequately prepared, heightening safety risks.

A production worker at the Jeep complex in Toledo told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It is all part of the World Class Manufacturing project. They want everyone to do preventive maintenance, basically the

same work skilled trades does, to save money and time.

"The UAW has agreed to it, and they are trying it at Chrysler first. It is crazy. We don't get to vote on anything."

The FCA worker also said that management is "ramping up harassment. They took our headphones last week. They took our water coolers away, so now there are only two water coolers for 400-500 people."

A skilled trades worker at Sterling Stamping north of Detroit said, "They are going to take tool and die makers off the line and turn their responsibilities over to operators unless there is a catastrophic failure. It is a precursor to their jobs going out the door.

"Right now they have 30 tool and die makers on layoff. That is so they can see if they can do without them.

"Everything is subject to change. The next contract is two and a half years away. [FCA CEO Sergio] Marchionne wants to get rid of FCA by selling it or merging it. It is a multi-billion dollar company, but we can't even get screws and bolts. People's morale is low. [The company] only cares about profits."

Another Sterling Heights skilled trades worker told the WSW, "They are trying it out with tool and die makers, welders and machine repair. They are fighting it at the Jefferson North plant [in Detroit]. Production workers are against it too. They are talking about all production workers withholding their dues payments from the UAW to protest it. They are saying, 'We don't want to set up tooling for \$1 an hour more.'

"There was an uproar at our plant. Everyone was against it. We are tired of the International [UAW] taking our jobs away. We have a petition out against it.

"I voted 'no' on the last contract, but then the UAW came back and tried to scare people. They said, 'Don't be surprised if there is a strike and people cross the

picket line and take your jobs.’ [Workers] knew the UAW wouldn’t support them, might even organize the people that crossed the picket line.”

In October of last year, workers overwhelmingly rejected a UAW-FCA concessions contract. The UAW responded by launching a massive campaign of lies and intimidation to push through a substantially similar contract, followed by similar tactics at GM and Ford.

“This reminds me of what happened when they implemented the alternative work schedule [10-hour shifts at straight time]. Everyone was against it, but the UAW said it was good for the company, so it went through.”

The ability of FCA and the UAW to impose significant changes to the auto contract without a membership vote underscores the fraud of the claims that the 2015 national agreement represented one of the “richest” ever negotiated. It demonstrates once against the anti-worker gang-up between the UAW and corporate management.

The latest attack on skilled trades workers comes as recent sales figures point to a downturn in the auto industry. Auto sales slumped in August for the second month, with Ford, General Motors, Toyota and Nissan all reporting sales declines. Ford sales fell 8 percent in August, with sales of the best-selling F-150 pickup truck down 6 percent. GM’s sales were down 5 percent, with year-to-date retail sales up only 1 percent, still the largest retail share gain of any automaker. Toyota sales were down 4.6 percent, while Nissan sales fell 6.5 percent.

Fiat Chrysler, meanwhile, reported a 3 percent sales gain, entirely due to the Jeep brand. Marchionne recently announced that FCA would end passenger car production in the United States and has outlined a reorganization of production focused on the sale of larger vehicles, putting a question mark over the jobs of thousands of US autoworkers. In July, the company laid off 1,300 workers at its Sterling Heights, Michigan Assembly Plant, which builds the Chrysler 200 passenger car. The company is being investigated based on allegations that it padded sales figures in an apparent bid to inflate stock prices.

This author also recommends:

The Great Autoworkers’ Struggle of 2015: Lessons of the rank-and-file revolt against the UAW [Socialist Equality Party Pamphlet]



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