

Unifor operative assaults WSWS reporter at CAMI strike rally

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9 October 2017

A reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site* was physically assaulted by an enforcer for the Canadian autoworkers union, Unifor, at a rally last Friday afternoon, October 6, outside of the General Motors CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario. The assault took place at a “solidarity march and rally” for striking CAMI workers called by Unifor Local 88, which posted on its web site, “Media, local politicians, public, Local 88 members... All are invited.”

WSWS reporter Shannon Jones, 62, was knocked to the ground by a man, wearing a “Unifor Local 88 Ingersoll” shirt and dark glasses, who refused to identify himself, but was photographed by Jones. The attack occurred after several Unifor thugs attempted to stop Jones and other WSWS reporters from reporting on the rally and speaking to CAMI workers about their three-week strike.

CAMI workers in contact with the WSWS later identified the assailant as Mario DiFelice, an alternative union rep on the CHASSIS/QC/FINAL/REPAIR/PILOT ASSEMBLY line for the C shift.

Unifor operatives—who also refused to identify themselves—ordered the team to leave the rally and attempted to snatch and tear up copies of the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and intimidate rank-and-file workers who wanted to speak to the WSWS.

This occurred as Unifor national President Jerry Dias, the leaders of the Canadian Labour Congress and Ontario Federation of Labour, and several speakers from the social democratic New Democratic Party prepared to speak. Since the beginning of the strike, Unifor Local 88 officials have refused to answer questions by WSWS reporters and instead have ordered picket captains to bar WSWS reporting teams from the picket lines and photograph them and their vehicles. At the same time, they have censored WSWS articles from their Facebook pages.

It is clear that Unifor officials were policing the rally

and that the order had gone out to watch out for the WSWS reporting team, which was immediately surrounded within moments of arriving. When WSWS reporters attempted to assert their rights, and ask why they were being excluded from a rally open to the public, the threats escalated.

At this point, Jones took a picture of one of the Unifor thugs—later identified as DiFelice—aggressively confronting another WSWS reporter. A moment later he threw Jones to the ground and demanded that he delete the photographs.

A more serious assault was only prevented because Cathy Austin, a former president of Unifor Local 88 and a retired CAMI worker, witnessed the attack and stepped forward to defend the democratic rights of the WSWS reporters. Recognizing Austin, the thugs retreated in the direction of the speakers’ platform.

Austin said she was shocked by the behavior of the goons and offered to stay with the WSWS reporters to prevent further attacks as they continued to speak with CAMI workers. “There is supposed to be labor democracy with respect and listening to different points of view. I am ashamed to see a brother pushed to the ground for handing out a flyer,” Austin, a veteran of the five-week strike at CAMI in 1992, said.

Noting that she was familiar with the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, Austin said, “We don’t all agree but we need to talk to each other about how to fight back on a global level. These corporations are global and all workers need to respond with common, international solidarity. There is no call for you to be treated like that.”

After the attack, several CAMI workers came up to the WSWS reporters to take copies of the newsletter, which has consistently covered their struggle since the strike began on September 17, providing a voice for rank-and-file workers and a political strategy to mobilize the working class throughout North America to win their

strike.

A warning must be made: Unifor officials are not just trying to silence the WSWS but to gag rank-and-file workers and beat back their fight to win substantial improvements in their wages, benefits and working conditions. The methods used against the WSWS today will be employed against militant workers who refuse to accept yet another concessionary contract pushed by Unifor.

It is significant that Van Boekel urged “team leaders” in the factory—those paid higher wages to enforce production goals and punitive absentee policies—to “reach out to their team members” because “We don’t know what is going on behind closed doors.” While Van Boekel framed this as supposed concern over the economic hardship workers are facing (while on a starvation ration of \$250 a week in strike pay) the union leadership is well aware of growing rank-and-file opposition to its pro-corporate record and does not want it to be organized.

Last year, the 20,000 workers at GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler recorded the largest opposition to a union-backed contract since the Canadian auto union split from the United Auto Workers in 1986. The year before, Fiat Chrysler workers rebelled against the UAW and the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* became the center of rank-and-file opposition, prompting UAW executives to denounce “outside agitators” and workers for using social media.

While Unifor and the UAW are hostile to uniting autoworkers across the border to fight the auto giants, there is little doubt that they have communicated with each other about the danger of the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* giving a voice and political program to an increasingly restive workforce.

Although GM made profits of \$9.43 billion (CAN \$11.82 billion) last year, including record North American earnings for its Wall Street and Bay Street investors, Unifor officials insist that the CAMI strike “is not about money” and warned workers they cannot make demands that would “price them out of jobs.”

Unifor has made only one public demand: that GM make the CAMI plant its “lead” facility for the production of the company’s hot-selling Equinox crossover vehicle. This would mean, in the event of the anticipated slowdown in North American vehicle sales, that workers at GM’s plants in Mexico who make the Equinox would be the first to be laid off.

GM has refused to grant even this paper promise, insisting corporate management has the unilateral power

to decide what it does with its assets.

At the rally, Unifor Local 88 Plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel claimed “90-95 percent” of the outstanding issues in the contract negotiations with GM had been resolved while providing no details of what Unifor has already conceded. This is consistent with Unifor’s practice of keeping workers in the dark.

In a nod to management, however, Van Boekel said 1,000 CAMI workers were due to retire over the next three to four years. This will allow GM to realize substantial savings since it can replace higher paid workers with new hires making substandard wages and benefits under Unifor’s 10-year “grow-in” wage scheme and its sanctioning of part-time employment.

Far from advancing a strategy to unite Canadian, Mexican and US workers in a common struggle to defend the jobs and living standards of all workers against GM and other global auto giants, Unifor is promoting “Canada-First” economic nationalism and the absurd claim that Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the billionaire US President Trump will negotiate, in the words of Dias, a “progressive” North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that is “for workers, not the corporations.” Unifor is seeking stronger protectionist measures against Mexico to insure its base of dues-paying members, no matter how little they make and how brutally they are exploited.

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* has urged CAMI workers to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by electing a rank-and-file strike committee to formulate their own demands and to mobilize the broadest support for their struggle throughout Canada, the US and Mexico. A component part of this is to demand an end to the thuggish attacks on the WSWS and to defend the right of workers to read and discuss what they choose.



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