

Amid escalating corruption scandal, top UAW operatives step down

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Turmoil appears to be mounting in the leadership of the United Auto Workers union in the face of mounting rank-and-file opposition and an ongoing corruption probe of the UAW targeting top officials.

On Wednesday, General Motors reported that Joe Ashton, a former UAW vice president and top negotiator, had resigned from the company board of directors. Ashton had been appointed to the GM board in 2014 as the UAW representative for the multibillion-dollar retiree health benefit trust fund. The UAW-controlled trust fund had been assigned one board seat under terms agreed during the 2009 GM bankruptcy in exchange for the UAW imposing massive concessions. No replacement for Ashton has yet been announced.

Ashton is reportedly a target of a probe by the FBI into possible illegal payouts by the UAW-GM Center for Human Resources. Cindy Estrada, who succeeded Ashton as UAW vice president in charge of the GM department, is also under investigation in relation to illegal payouts.

The departure of Ashton follows the announcement by UAW Vice President for Fiat Chrysler Norwood Jewell, age 59, of his early retirement effective January 1, 2018. His term ran through June 2018. Jewell was the recipient of a \$2,180 shotgun purchased illegally with funds from the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center.

One former senior UAW official and two Fiat Chrysler executives have already pled guilty in the illegal diversion of \$4.5 million in joint training center funds that was used for expensive purchases of items such as designer clothes and jewelry. The payouts were intended, as one Fiat Chrysler executive commented, to keep the union, “fat, dumb and happy.”

Earlier the UAW administration announced its nominations for the leading union posts ahead of the

2018 Constitutional Convention in Detroit. The convention is essentially a rubber stamp for the picks of the incumbent UAW leadership, since rank-and-file workers are not permitted to vote in the selection of the president and executive board members, and undemocratic rules make floor challenges virtually impossible.

Gary Jones, director of UAW Region 5 covering 17 western states, is slated to be the next UAW president. Jones is a career union bureaucrat and certified public accountant who joined the international staff in 1990. In 1995 Jones was appointed top administrative assistant to UAW Secretary Treasurer Roy Wyse, and continued in that post under the next administration. In 2004, he was appointed assistant Region 5 director, where he helped preside over a series of plant closures, including the shutdown of the NUMMI plant in California in 2010.

The nomination of Jones appears to be a desperate attempt by the UAW to find a figure not tainted by scandal. Typically, the UAW chooses the head of one of its Big Three automotive departments for the union presidency. However, the corruption investigation has caught up the leading UAW officials at Ford, Fiat Chrysler and GM.

Estrada from GM had long been considered the most likely candidate to replace UAW President Dennis Williams, who, according to UAW rules, must retire at the end of his current term. However, Estrada is deeply discredited, not only by her naming in relation to the FBI probe, but in her role, along with Jewell and UAW Vice President for Ford Jimmy Settles, in ramming through the sellout 2015 national contract agreement against stiff rank-and-file opposition.

Estrada was viciously hostile to those exposing the details of the 2015 sellout and in one Facebook post

claimed the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* was backed by “Right-to-Work Republicans.” This from a woman who draws close to a \$200,000 a year annual salary from the UAW in addition to undisclosed income as director of the UAW-GM Human Resource Center, along with a post on the board of the retiree healthcare trust fund.

For his part Jewell evoked outrage on the part of Fiat Chrysler workers for his intransigent defense of the hated two-tier wage system, telling Jeep workers in Toledo that they were “misinformed” about what the 2015 contract contained. He arrogantly told workers that nothing would change if they voted down the deal. “The money is the money” he insisted.

UAW Vice President for Ford Jimmy Settles is no less hated. While not yet named in the FBI probe, he became notorious in 2015 for engineering the narrow ratification of the sellout Ford deal, evoking allegations of vote rigging and ballot stuffing. Settles orchestrated a last-minute postponement of the vote for UAW Local 600 covering Ford operations in Dearborn when the national contract looked like it was heading for defeat. He then called a press conference, from which *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* reporters were barred, to browbeat workers into voting “yes” in a ballot marked by numerous reports of irregularities.

Another top UAW official, Secretary Treasurer Gary Casteel, who is also director of the UAW transnational department, oversaw the humiliating failure to win union recognition at the Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi. Despite an intense campaign by the UAW, workers voted by a 2-1 margin against union certification. The rout at Nissan was followed by similar lopsided vote by workers at Fuyao Glass America near Dayton, Ohio, a former center of the GM manufacturing empire that had been previously heavily unionized. After decades of deindustrialization, aided and abetted by the UAW, Dayton and surrounding Montgomery County are now the center of the opioid crisis in the US.

Nearly forty years of betrayals by the UAW have transformed this organization into a corrupt tool of management, which no reshuffling of the leadership can conceal. This has been further demonstrated by the response by the union to the recent deaths of young temporary part-time (TPT) Ford worker Jacoby Hennings and Ivan Bridgewater, an electrician at

Ford’s Kentucky Truck Plant killed in an industrial accident on December 9.

The UAW attacked Hennings, who apparently committed suicide on October 20 under still unexplained circumstances, claiming he appeared to be on drugs—an assertion that has now been disproven by the release of the autopsy report. In the case of Bridgewater, the UAW officials are actively working to protect Ford and conceal its own role.

The 2015 UAW Big Three contract sanctioned the increased use of part-time temporary workers, who earn lower pay and few benefits with no job protections. Hennings was working at both Ford and Fiat Chrysler at the time of his death, and was reportedly upset about the refusal of management to upgrade him to full-time status. He apparently shot himself in desperation after meeting for an hour with UAW officials at the plant.

In the case of Bridgewater, the UAW has worked with management to drive up production, sacrificing the safety and health of workers in the process. No worker can expect a serious investigation into the conditions surrounding Bridgewater’s death given that the UAW and management operate a joint safety committee. These joint committees offer cushy jobs to union officials while seeking to reduce the exposure of management to fines and citations and covering up unsafe conditions.

The complete discrediting of the UAW has created a mood of angry opposition in the auto factories. This was expressed in the near walkout by Fiat Chrysler workers at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit on December 2 after workers were sickened by gas fumes. The UAW acted as an enforcer for the company, keeping workers on the job while joining with management to cover up the seriousness of the incident.



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