

Workers discuss UAW corruption scandal at WSWS Autoworker Newsletter call-in meeting

Our reporters
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Dozens of autoworkers participated in a call-in meeting called by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* on Wednesday night to discuss the corruption scandal engulfing the United Auto Workers union (UAW). The event generated intense interest among autoworkers who shared news about the call-in on social media and in the factories.

Jerry White, editor of the newsletter, opened the discussion, reviewing the plea agreement released last week by a former top Fiat Chrysler labor negotiator who acknowledged that FCA executives had bribed top UAW officials “to obtain benefits, concessions and advantages” in bargaining agreements between 2009 and 2015.

Workers had correctly rejected the lies by UAW President Dennis Williams who claimed the bribery scheme had no effect on the contracts, White said. “If you hired an attorney and later found out he had been on the payroll of the opposing party, you would fire him and tear up any bogus agreement he reached.” Autoworkers should adopt the same attitude towards the UAW and the contracts it signed with FCA and at Ford and GM, too.

The determination to overturn these rotten deals, he said, was part of a growing mood of militancy among workers around the world, evidenced by the recent wildcat strike by Romanian Ford workers and the ongoing strikes by German workers at VW, BMW, Ford and other corporations. After more than a decade of stagnant wages and the spread of low-paid temporary labor, even as corporate profits and stock markets hit record levels, workers are determined to win substantial improvements.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* urged workers to

form rank-and-file committees in every factory, independent of the corrupt UAW, to campaign for the widest mobilization of workers to overturn the contracts. Workers should formulate and fight for their own demands, White said, including the abolition of the two-tier system, a 25 percent across-the-board wage increase and the restoration of all the concessions handed over by the UAW.

In the discussion, autoworkers reviewed their own experiences with the UAW and raised questions about the newsletter’s call for the establishment of rank-and-file committees.

Gladys, a retired General Motors (GM) worker from Flint, said, “It’s not only what the UAW has done to workers in the last two contracts, they have also allowed GM to shed the benefits of retirees. The UAW is so corrupt you can’t even get any response from them when you go to the UAW union hall. They didn’t have any dental for years because the UAW took over retiree health care. Copays and deductibles have gone up so high, retirees don’t even go the doctor. They have left GM retirees worldwide without.”

She also pointed to the “underhanded” way that the UAW and GM concealed the Flint water crisis, remaining silent after the company stopped using city water because it was corroding its engine parts. “I believe what happened to the labor force is capitalism at its worst. The UAW has turned its back on generations of workers.”

A retired General Motors worker from St. Catherines, Ontario, said the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), now called Unifor, had degenerated just like the UAW, and had pushed through a historic concession deal in 2016.

Eric London, a writer for the WSWS, said, “What

workers need to realize is that nobody is going to solve this problem for them—not the FBI, not the courts. Workers have to take matters into their own hands. There is no savior. This is going to take a fight, like it took for our great grandparents. The solution is going to come from the working class itself.”

A Toledo Jeep worker said he liked what was being said about uniting and getting together, especially through social media. “But here in Toledo,” he said, “you have the company and the UAW looking at everything we write. How would we go about protecting ourselves and preventing retaliation by the union and the company?”

Every measure should be taken to protect workers from company and union spies, White said, pointing to the decision by GM workers in St. Louis to ban UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada from their Facebook page months after she imposed the 2015 sellout contract on GM workers. But the self-defense of workers, he said, was inseparable from building new organizations, independent of the UAW, which would genuinely represent workers and mobilize their collective strength to oppose management abuse.

Another worker said, “I heard you say the courts aren’t going to save us, and that the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] isn’t going to save us, and there’s nothing we can do from within the UAW. I’m not so sure I agree with that. There is the reform caucus. They are clearly talking about eradicating the corruption from the UAW. Do you know much about that?”

White said there had been many “reform” movements in the UAW, including the New Directions faction in the 1980s and 1990s. But all of them failed to change anything. That was because the cause of the problem wasn’t simply the personal corruption of this or that union leader but the vast economic changes over the last four decades that have led to the transformation of the unions into tools of the corporations.

The UAW and other unions, not just in the US but around the world, are based on economic nationalism, and “had no progressive response to globalization.” Facing corporate threats to shift production to lower wage countries, the UAW abandoned any resistance to the corporations and joined the capitalist owners to drive down the wages and conditions and convince the corporations to stay in the US.

In Canada, union leaders split from the UAW in the mid-1980s, hoping the cheaper dollar and government-paid health benefits would induce automakers to remain. The concessions imposed by the UAW and the opening up of Mexico for even cheaper labor, however, undermined the “Buy Canadian” strategy, and the CAW responded in kind, introducing two-tier wages and betraying strikes, including last year’s month-long battle at GM’s CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario.

Gladys said David Yettaw, who had been a leader of New Directions, was the president of her union local, Local 599 in Flint. “He allowed GM to shut the Buick City complex,” she said, referring to the massive industrial complex in Flint, which once employed 30,000 workers and was closed in 1999.

Josh, a young worker from Australia, then spoke up, saying, “There are no autoworkers left in this country. The unions did nothing to stop the closing of the plants by GM, Ford, Toyota and other companies. They gave concession after concession, but when it came down to it, the companies said the price of labor was uncompetitive.

“I really agree with what the speakers have said about international unity. The companies say we want to produce this car and we’re going to see which country is going to work cheaper. We can’t organize this on a national basis. The brother talking about this reform program for the UAW—they are talking about going back to the glory days. We don’t need a program for the past but for the future. We live in a global economy, and we’re not going to get anywhere unless we realize that working people don’t have a country.

“We make all the wealth, they need us. We don’t need them. If we took all the factories around the world, we could end hunger in a month. We’ve never been in such a productive era, and yet there’s ongoing poverty. That’s capitalism.”



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