

“Everything they took from us needs to be returned, plus the money they stole”

Growing outrage from autoworkers over UAW bribery scandal

A WSWS reporting team
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Autoworkers at a Detroit area Fiat Chrysler factory expressed growing outrage over a corruption scandal in which the United Auto Workers (UAW) signed away their rights, wages and working conditions in exchange for bribes from Fiat Chrysler (FCA) executives.

Workers at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant were reacting to local news reports that federal prosecutors had named the UAW as a “co-conspirator” in the illegal scheme, which involved FCA executives paying off the UAW to impose company friendly labor agreements.

During the four-day UAW Constitutional Convention, outgoing UAW President Dennis Williams sought to blame the affair on a few former union officials “who betrayed our trust.” He repeated the absurd claim that the payoff of more than \$1.5 million to top union negotiators from 2009 to 2015 did not affect the outcome of the labor agreements.

Workers at the plant rejected Williams’ statements. “All of this corruption was directly related to contract negotiations despite what they are saying,” Donna, an FCA worker with more than 25 years seniority, told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*. “They took away our hours, our money, our profit sharing, unfair hiring practices, these three tiers instead of two, the way they won’t roll people over in time [to full time positions], so I just want to put my protest out there. Everything they took from us needs to be returned, as well as the money they stole.

“I consider these contracts null and void because everything they did was done behind closed doors, without our say-so. We all voted against this. How did it still get through? Ninety percent of our workforce said ‘no.’ The fact that it was ratified was illegal to me.”

Amid the growing corruption scandal, the hand-picked delegates at the constitutional convention on Wednesday voted to give the UAW International Executive Board members a 30 percent salary increase. The decision was

made right after delegates voted to retain the 25 percent dues increase from the last convention and to reject any exemption for lower-paid, second tier workers and temporary part-time workers.

“The salary for the UAW president will now be topping \$200,000 a year,” Dennis, a newer worker, told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “It’s not about the worker anymore, the guy on the line, it’s about how they can get ahead.

“They did say at the convention that union dues should be able to come down once the strike fund reaches \$850 million. However, that’s in the air because they keep on taking out of the fund, and they can keep it below. It’s funny how that works, isn’t it? It’s sad, but I’m not surprised. The unions were meant to defend us against the corporate executives not be in bed with them.”

Dennis said his mother is a long-time GM worker at the Lake Orion plant, near Pontiac, Michigan. Rank-and-file workers there are up in arms over a secret agreement signed by the International and Local 5690 leaders that will allow GM to replace senior, full-time workers with low-paid contractors.

Responding to the *Autoworker Newsletter’s* call for workers to form rank-and-file factory committees to defend themselves against both the corporations and the unions, Dennis said, “It’s like we have to build unions against the unions now. We work all the time and don’t have the leverage or the time to fight this ourselves. That’s what the union was for, but they’re not doing that job. You’re right, there needs to be something new if this is going to work, and it’s going to have to come from the workers themselves.”

“The contract that was passed forces second-tier workers to work eight years to get top payment,” another newer worker said. “It’s not fair. It’s a game. We’re supposed to get a bonus because of the tax breaks the company got. But they charge us 22 percent tax on it; and the union wants its

percentage too, from our bonus.

“Thank you for telling us the truth. Some workers don’t know what is going on, and we need somebody to explain more and more. If you ask the union, they don’t make anything clear for you.”

“We’re not making a good living because they cut the wages for us younger workers,” a worker who just got rolled over into a full-time position said. “They brought in all these Millennials, and we can’t make a good living on the half wages we’re being paid.

“The union officials should be taken to court and get jail time. But I know the government won’t come in on our side, the big guys always win. Something’s got to be done by the workers, for the workers, and we have to do it ourselves,” she added, responding to the newsletter’s call for rank-and-file factory committees.

Melvin, a senior worker, said, “It was obvious in the last contract that it was the first time in 15-20 years that the auto companies were making money, so you could go after what was lost in the three previous contracts. At that time, the UAW chose to go after the weakest corporation as the strike target for pattern bargaining. Everybody knows that was a crazy decision, and the only thing that makes sense is that somebody was paid off to do it. No one could say it, but we felt it. Now we know it.

“Nothing is going to change with this leadership at the convention or in the near future. I do believe this membership is getting an education, and that at some point we are going to stand up for fair wages. We don’t have anything as simple as equal pay for equal work. The UN says that’s a human right, and we don’t have that in this plant. I get hired on a Tuesday. You get hired on a Thursday, and we get unequal pay.

“There has to be a rebellion for a fair distribution of the wealth that is generated in these plants.” After taking note of the fact that the union officials just voted for a 30 percent salary increase for themselves, Melvin said facetiously, “Of course, they are going to negotiate a 30 percent increase in our wages, that would only be fair.”

Referring to the revolt against the UAW-backed contract in 2015, he added, “We knew we were being shafted, but we weren’t prepared. This time we need to be prepared. We have an entirely new workforce. We have to prepare to fight for our own best interests, which would mean an end to tiers, the return of cost of living, and good wages.

Two younger workers, who have been at the plant for seven months, but preferred to remain anonymous out of fear of retribution from the company and the union, also spoke to the WSWs. They were just rolled over from temporary part-time (TPT) contracts to full-time but are on a "probation" period under which they can be easily fired.

“The company is thinking about the profit, not the workers,” said one. “They say if you don’t like it you can leave, and there are people lined up around the street willing to take your job. The union, for me, is full of crap. We ask them a question, and they say they don’t know the answer. They say they will get back to you.” She said that the revelations about Chrysler’s payments to the UAW were “just wrong, and it shows we don’t mean anything to them.”

Her co-worker added, “I can’t even make ends meet. I’m making \$500 per week now.” Last week, Warren Truck cut full-time workers’ hours to seven hours per day. “When I first started I was bringing home \$950, and my bills were getting paid. Now, I’m getting \$500, and that’s my food bills.” After working for only nine months at the plant, she had an injured wrist and cuts and bruises on her arm. She added that she would not be allowed to take a day off to get medical treatment, because if she missed her rostered day at work, she could be laid off.

Donna, the worker with 25 years, said she knew about the death of Jacoby Hennings, the young temporary part-time worker who police and union officials say took his own life outside the UAW offices in the Ford Woodhaven Stamping plant in Michigan last year. In addition to working at Ford, Hennings also had a second temp job at Warren Truck.

“There’s still a mystery behind what caused it,” she said. “I can tell you directly, it’s stress. They treat these TPTs like garbage. Both of his parents worked here for years. I’m sure he knew all the stories on how to behave and how to act, and how he should have been treated. He went to the UAW several times and he was denied help. They don’t get representation, but the part-timers say, ‘I pay you dues.’ A lot of these young people don’t want to put up with all of that.

“The UAW is a partner of the company and a big business, with the trips, the money and the stuff they sponsor that we know nothing about. A lot of us are brainwashed with the union, and we think that we can’t do this ourselves. But that’s how the union got started, somebody did it themselves. Workers are going to have to rise up again, worldwide. It is already happening in other countries. Our grandkids and our future are going to suffer if we don’t.”



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