UAW holds strike authorization vote at Fiat Chrysler's Kokomo, Indiana transmission operations

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Workers at Fiat Chrysler's transmission operations plants in the Kokomo, Indiana area voted Thursday and Friday on a request by United Auto Workers Local 685 for strike authorization over a reported backlog of grievances. While a final tally was not available at the time of this writing, preliminary reports indicate an overwhelming "yes" vote.

Over 3,000 hourly and salaried workers are employed at FCA's Kokomo area transmission facilities, which supply FCA North American vehicle assembly plants on a just-in-time basis. The workers are members of UAW Local 685.

A letter issued by UAW Local 685 President Rick Ward to members said the strike vote was in response to "serious violations of the local agreement," without going into more specifics.

Workers should have no illusions that the UAW will carry out a fight. From the standpoint of local officials, the calling of a strike vote is aimed at diverting anger over deteriorating conditions, themselves the product of the UAW's shameless collaboration with management.

The strike vote by Kokomo transmission workers comes in the midst of continuing revelations relating to the bribery of high-level UAW negotiators by FCA officials. Among those indicted or implicated in the scheme to divert more than $1.5 million from the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center to union officials are four of the eight members of the UAW negotiating committee overseeing the 2015 contract talks with FCA that resulted in a pro-company sellout agreement.

Despite claims by the UAW leadership that the corruption only involved a few "bad actors," there is a widespread feeling among autoworkers that the entire organization is rotten. This feeling was amplified by the behavior of UAW executives at the recent Constitutional Convention in Detroit, where delegates voted to give UAW International President Gary Jones a 30 percent ($46,000) pay raise and equally provocative increase to other top officers.

A veteran Kokomo worker noted, "There's been a strong turnout for the vote to strike. The general consensus from members is that in light of the scandal, workers want strong representation."

Other Kokomo transmission workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* Autoworker Newsletter said that the company's mistreatment of temporary part-time (TPT) workers was a major concern. A veteran worker at the Tipton Transmission Plant outside of Kokomo said, "We have a lot of TPT workers on the 8 speed [transmission] line that they are forced to work overtime, even though TPT workers are not supposed to work overtime. That's unheard of. That is a major, major issue.

"They are sending them from department to department to fill in the gaps. You are putting an unskilled worker in a spot where they are not properly trained. That is a safety issue."

She said that TPT workers as well as second-tier and first-tier workers had voted overwhelmingly to authorize strike action.

Another veteran Kokomo transmission worker reported that there were "300 grievances over health and safety issues that have been repeatedly ignored and suppressed by FCA management." He added that management has been changing the time of scheduled grievance meetings and sending low-level representatives instead of the proper officials to the meetings.

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The Kokomo transmission facilities are critical to Chrysler's US operations, and a strike could quickly shut down assembly plants, putting Kokomo workers in a potentially powerful position.

The brutal exploitation of TPT workers has been facilitated by the UAW, which eliminated all restrictions on the hiring of temporary workers in the 2015 contract. Management is determined to drive out as many senior "legacy" workers as possible to replace them with lower-paid TPT and second-tier workers to slash costs. This is particularly true at the Kokomo transmission operations, where large numbers of senior workers are nearing retirement age.

The unserious nature of the strike threat by the Local 685 leadership is underscored by the fact that the union has not spelled out in detail the precise issues that it wants to resolve. This follows a pattern where the UAW will announce a phony strike deadline only to announce a last minute "settlement" based on an agreement dictated by management.

By their votes, Kokomo workers are demonstrating their determination to fight. However, to be successful, workers need to establish their complete independence from the machinations of the UAW by forming a rank-and-file factory committee headed by the most trusted militants. Such a committee would advance clear demands, including the immediate conversion of all TPT workers to full time, the elimination of tiers and workers control over line speed and safety.

Serious preparations for a struggle must involve establishing links between FCA workers in Kokomo with workers throughout FCA, Ford and General Motors, as well as other sections of workers, such as United Parcel Service drivers who are rebelling against attempts by the Teamsters and management to impose a rotten sellout deal.

The issues facing Kokomo workers are not purely local issues. They reflect the brutality of the UAW-management gang-up against workers that has resulted in a decades-long assault on the conditions of autoworkers, dismantling the gains won in the struggles of previous generations.

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