

UAW silent after Fiat Chrysler worker injured at Kokomo casting plant

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Autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler's operations in Kokomo, Indiana face a wall of silence on the part of the United Auto Workers and management following the injury of a worker at the Kokomo Casting Plant Wednesday.

According to the Kokomo Fire Department, a rescue team went to the plant after receiving reports that a worker was trapped. When they arrived they saw "There was a piece of the machine that had come down and caught the lower part of his body." Workers used machinery to lift the equipment off the man, who was still conscious, until he could be extricated.

The worker, whose name has not been released, was taken to a local hospital. No details were provided on his condition or prognosis for recovery. The UAW did not release a statement on the incident. A call by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* to UAW Local 1166 at the casting plant was not returned.

In July, workers at four FCA Kokomo transmission plants, members of UAW Local 685, voted overwhelmingly for strike authorization over hundreds of unresolved grievances. Workers are angry over the deterioration of safety conditions and the treatment of temporary part time workers (TPTs), who are being forced to work overtime.

A Kokomo transmission worker who wished to remain anonymous told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that the injured worker was airlifted to a hospital in Indianapolis due to the serious nature of his injuries. Indications are that the worker was in skilled trades and had been called in to maintain machinery when the incident happened.

"Everyone should be outraged," the worker said. "This is supposed to be a World Class Manufacturing facility, state of the art. The biggest pillar of WCM is safety.

"I want to know what is going on with him," he added. "Is he maimed for life, will he recover, why did it happen? They should own up to what happened and fix the problems. Talk is cheap."

Workers should place no confidence in the official investigation by the UAW-Fiat Chrysler joint safety committee, which serves as little more than a tool for management. Rather than expose unsafe conditions, the UAW seeks to withhold information in order to protect management from potential liability.

Likewise, toothless state and federal oversight bodies, such as the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration, will issue perfunctory findings and levy at most a token fine.

The collaboration of the UAW with management to cover up health and safety conditions underscores the need for the creation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees. These committees should launch their own independent investigation into unsafe conditions and enforce workers' rights to a safe work environment.

These committees must insist that talks with management be held in the open and that it has representatives at all negotiations. In addition, workers must be given at least two weeks to view and discuss any agreement that is reached.

Workers must demand the voiding of the corrupt contracts signed by the UAW and launch a fight for the restoration of all concessions, including the elimination of tiers and the conversion of all TPT workers to regular employee status.

The injury at Kokomo Casting underscores the seriousness of the complaints by Fiat Chrysler workers over unsafe conditions that motivated the strike vote. They put paid to the recent claims by Brian Harlow, head of manufacturing for Fiat Chrysler's North

American operations, that “We’re one of the safest plants to work at in the world.”

For its part, the UAW has imposed a blackout on news over the progress of negotiations. Despite the strike vote, Local 685 has not made an official request for strike authorization to UAW regional officials.

A Fiat Chrysler worker in Kokomo contacted by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* said that an informational meeting held by the UAW last month to provide an “update” on the negotiations “was just pretty much smoke and mirrors. ... just a way to make it look like the union is fighting for us, but in truth it’s just a way to get votes and try to push the next contract through.

“When you have so many grievances there should be no question about what to do. But when you have corporations stuffing the union’s pockets, they will do or say whatever it takes to push for minimal offers at the negotiating table.”

He continued, “I believe once again our top negotiator will sell us out like everyone before her.”

On the part of local UAW officials, the recent strike vote is posturing aimed at deflecting workers’ anger in the wake of continuing revelations of rampant UAW corruption and the bribery of top union officials by FCA management. It follows the provocative vote by delegates at the UAW Constitutional Convention in Detroit to award massive pay hikes to top UAW officers.

The bogus character of the negotiations is further underscored by the fact that they are being conducted under a news blackout and no specific demands have been presented by the UAW. Any agreement that is reached under such conditions will be a betrayal of Fiat Chrysler workers that will do nothing to address safety or the conditions facing TPT workers.

Cindy Estrada, the UAW vice president for Fiat Chrysler, has reportedly been involved in meetings with management over Kokomo. Estrada’s private charity is being investigated as part of the federal inquiry into UAW corruption. As head of the GM department, Estrada negotiated a sweetheart deal with management to allow the hiring of low paid contract workers to replace senior GM employees who faced layoff.

The 2015 national contract sanctioned a vast increase in the use of super-exploited TPT workers who have

lower pay and no contract rights. Management is determined to drive out older “legacy” workers and replace them with TPTs and second tier workers to slash costs. This is particularly true at its Kokomo operations where many workers are nearing retirement.

Workers in Kokomo are in a powerful position. Fiat Chrysler Kokomo operations produce virtually all the transmissions used in the company’s North American operations. A strike would quickly bring assembly plants to a halt because of the just-in-time inventory system. Precisely because of this, both management and the UAW are determined to prevent such a disruption.

Commenting on the possibility of a strike, Harlow told the *Kokomo Tribune*, “We can’t afford an interruption. Would the company take a financial hit? Yeah, we would if there was an action to interrupt production here. Reliability of supply is a big thing, especially around the world.”

The critical question is the building of a new leadership and forging a strategy based on the independent mobilization of the working class, linking up of the struggle by autoworkers with the growing rebellion by the working class, including United Parcel Service workers, Amazon workers, steelworkers, hotel workers in Chicago and the strike movement by teachers in Washington state.



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