

“Collectively we are powerful beyond measure”

Kokomo Chrysler workers press for strike action

Jerry White
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It has been two months since workers at Fiat Chrysler’s transmission plants in Kokomo and Tipton, Indiana, voted by 99.9 percent to authorize the United Auto Workers to call a strike to settle an estimated 200 unresolved local grievances, including health and safety issues and the abuse of temporary part-time employees.

Since then, UAW Local 685 and UAW International officials at the union’s Solidarity House headquarters have ignored the mandate by rank-and-file workers and kept workers in the dark about ongoing negotiations. UAW Local 685 President Rick Ward and UAW International Vice President Cindy Estrada have made it clear that the UAW will do nothing to disrupt the company’s production and profits.

The Kokomo-area plants—which include Indiana Transmission I and II, Kokomo Transmission, Kokomo Casting and Tipton—employ more than 7,000 workers and are key to Fiat Chrysler’s operations around the world.

Over the last two weeks, workers have become increasingly livid over the obstruction of the UAW and the union’s refusal to keep workers informed. At the factory gates, one worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “We shouldn’t still be working in here. It’s two months since the strike vote.”

The horrific injury of Eric Parsons, who was crushed when a die slide fell on him at the Kokomo Casting Plant on September 5, has brought home the health and safety issues raised by workers, which make up the bulk of the grievances the UAW has allowed to pile up.

On top of this there are new threats to jobs. After 15 years, the last five-speed transmission was produced at Indiana Transmission Plant (ITP) II in August, and the factory is now down to less than 200 workers. At least 80 temporary part-time workers also recently lost their jobs, according to workers.

In addition, FCA has subcontracted some of its 8- and 9-speed transmission production to the Germany-based

supplier ZF Group, which reportedly pays workers as little as \$9 an hour at its plants in Gray Court, South Carolina, and Lafayette, Indiana.

With access to such a source of cheap labor, there is little doubt FCA is seeking major concessions in wages, benefits and working conditions from Kokomo workers. For its part, the UAW has demonstrated that it will blackmail workers into accepting any concession in exchange for promises of jobs, which never pan out.

On Tuesday, supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* distributed hundreds of newsletters to workers at the Kokomo Transmission Plant and at union meetings called by UAW Local 685.

The newsletter urged workers to reject the stonewalling by the UAW and to “use the opportunity of today’s meetings to form a rank-and-file committee to organize a fight. Workers should demand the implementation of a strike deadline of 12:01 a.m. on Monday, September 24, for the company to resolve all outstanding grievances.”

It added: “The committee of trusted rank-and-file workers, with one representative from every department and every shift, should demand the ability to monitor all negotiations and provide detailed reports to the membership. No more backroom deals and sellouts!”

John, a worker with two decades in the plant, pointed to the corruption scandal engulfing the UAW, which involved the payment of millions of dollars in bribes to union negotiators to sign contracts favorable to Fiat Chrysler. “Workers are not happy with the UAW here. [Former union president] Dennis Williams said the bribes had nothing to do with the negotiations. That’s ridiculous. Why else would they be paying the union?”

According to workers who attended the union meetings, UAW Local 685 President Rick Ward tried to adjourn the gatherings as fast as possible to avoid any discussion by members who voted unanimously for a strike. Ward opened the morning meeting by announcing that he was surprised by

the larger turnout since there was nothing special about the meeting or anything new to report. He then hurriedly closed the meeting without taking any comments.

In the evening, a veteran autoworker took the floor and sharply criticized the stalling by the UAW. “If we’re going to strike it needs to be now,” he said. “If we beat the war drums and do nothing, the companies will laugh at us, and when the next contract comes they will be demanding three tiers. We have all the leverage we’re going to have. The company depends on the eight-speed transmissions built here.”

According to reports given to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, the worker pointed to the severe injury of Eric Parsons at the casting plant and then called for a floor vote from the members to walk out on strike Monday to fight for the resolution of all the outstanding grievances and to defend jobs.

After repeatedly telling members that the UAW didn’t want a strike, Ward responded to the worker by saying he was fully in support of a strike, but that the worker couldn’t call for a vote because it was not possible to strike unless it was sanctioned by the UAW International. Without the International’s sanction, Ward claimed, the company could fire all the workers, and the union would be fined for all the downtime, leading to its bankruptcy.

Ward added that “there is no expiration on the strike authorization vote,” meaning the UAW could drag things out for months and months without acting on the 99.9 percent mandate by workers. He also hinted that a deal to impose new concessions was in the works, saying, “We got this transmission that will give us a 180 more jobs; if you don’t take that there is a good chance that there can be 1,000 jobs lost.”

Why should workers wait for permission to fight from UAW International executives at Solidarity House who are implicated in a massive bribery scheme with the auto bosses? The UAW International and Local 685 officials have repeatedly stated that they have no intention of disrupting FCA’s production or profits. Both the UAW and auto executives fear that a powerful struggle by Kokomo workers would encourage workers throughout FCA, GM and Ford to overturn the rotten contracts signed by bribed UAW officials and fight to restore all the UAW-backed concessions.

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For workers, however, the fight in Kokomo, as the deadly conditions in the plants show, is a life-and-death matter. That is why workers must form a rank-and-file committee, independent of the UAW, to take the conduct of this fight into their own hands. This committee should link up with

workers throughout the auto and auto parts industry in the US and internationally to prepare a common fight.

After the meetings, the WSWS spoke with Kokomo workers about their struggle. “If we walk, 7,000 workers are a lot of power,” one worker said. “Right now, they need the 8-speed for the Jeep, the 300 sedan and the Charger and Challenger, which are big sellers. The plants are working seven days a week and holidays and still can’t keep up with demand. If we shut these plants down, it would quickly close plants throughout the US and world, and it would cripple the company. They made record profits last month and wouldn’t want a walkout to last long.

“If other workers see us fighting and winning this battle, it would motivate them. They all have great selling trucks like the GM Silverado and Ford F-150, and when we stick together we can fight to get rid of tiers, get our pensions back.

“In my view, we need a general strike by all workers, not just autoworkers.

“I’m this close to withdrawing my union dues. I always said I would die a union member, but I’m sick of being screwed over by the company and the union. We’re getting raped by the union and paying them to do it. The last few meetings, they rush through the agenda and put a motion to end it before any discussion like there is something they don’t want us to know.”

Another worker added, “The workers don’t recognize their strength and power. In fact, we are the most powerful section of the economy. We have to get it together and recognize that we have more in common with each other than we will ever have with the elites, the corporations and the unions, which are one and the same. It’s like the Democrats and Republicans—they’re all the same.”

Referring to the UAW, she said, “It is evident that this is not a democratically run organization. There is no rehabilitating the UAW. If they could have been reformed it would have been done 10 years ago. The same people who imposed all the concessions are still here. They are making six figures and gave themselves a 30 percent raise.

“If we wait until 2019, we will get the same or worse than the way we fared while FCA was bribing the UAW officials. Collectively we are powerful beyond measure. If we recognize that we will be unbeatable. The powers-that-be recognize it and are scared to death.”



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