Fiat Chrysler Kokomo workers angered by UAW obstruction to fight over health and safety

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More than two months after an overwhelming strike vote by some 6,000 Fiat Chrysler Kokomo, Indiana area transmission workers over a backlog of 200 unresolved grievances, the United Auto Workers is still ignoring demands for action.

The Kokomo transmission operation is a key supplier for Fiat Chrysler, building most of the transmissions used in its North American vehicle assembly plants. Workers feel they are in a powerful position to assert their demands for a safe work environment and an end to the management dictatorship in the plants.

The urgency of the situation is underscored by the horrific injury suffered by Kokomo Casting Plant worker Eric Parsons who was crushed when a die slide fell on him September 5. He suffered internal injuries and multiple fractures. Since the accident there has been no information released by the UAW on the events surrounding the incident, nor any updates on Parson's condition.

The stonewalling by the UAW can only encourage management to step up its provocations. FCA has subcontracted production of 8- and 9-speed transmissions to ZF Group, a low wage automotive supplier. Workers at its facilities in Lafayette, Indiana and South Carolina earn as little as $9 an hour. The UAW has been silent on this threat just as it said nothing about the recent layoff of 80 Temporary Part Time (TPT) workers at the Kokomo Transmission Plant.

A veteran Kokomo transmission worker told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that no information has been released by the UAW either on the condition of Eric Parsons or the status of negotiations. "There have been no fundraisers, no t-shirts, the UAW has not spearheaded anything for this worker.

"There is a good reason why so many workers say they don't care for the UAW.

"They don't even want workers talking about the 2019 contract until negotiations begin next year. I completely disagree with that. We need discussions now. When there is a contract we need at least a couple of weeks to read it, and not just the 'highlights.'

"It's not a contract anyway," the worker added, referring to the secret memorandums of understandings and side agreements signed by the UAW. "It is not worth the paper it's printed on.

"The education of workers concerning safety has been neglected. At the same time, they are pitting us against each other. Two workers do the exact same job but make significantly different money. It is very divisive.

"We all have the same interests. We need solidarity."

The worker discussed the Alternative Work Schedule (AWS), under which management can schedule 10-hour days without the payment of overtime after 8 hours. "We need to abolish the AWS and restore time-and one-half after 8 hours.

"I think we should put the hammer down and demand the tearing up of all the corrupt contracts. We are in a strong position; we make all the 8-speed transmissions. They are suppressing our right to strike; they have no right to do that. We should set a strike deadline. We took a strike vote, but the UAW isn't doing anything."

Another Kokomo transmission worker contacted by the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* said of the fight faced by rank-and-file autoworkers, "Workers are pissed off. People feel frustrated by the company and

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the union. The UAW says they can't give us information because they are afraid someone will run and tell management, but there is nothing that management doesn't know already."

The worker referred to the UAW corruption scandal, which has seen the indictment of high-ranking union officials for accepting bribes from Fiat Chrysler. "I am sick of it. They (indicted UAW officials) will only get a slap on the wrist. Their protégés will then step in and continue the same thing. I don't think you can make them do anything.

"We work while they sit in their offices and decide our fate, but don't even ask our opinion. They get themselves elected by beating the war drums, then take no action.

"The UAW says we have to 'take back the shop floor.' What we have to do is take back the shop floor from the UAW."

The worker then outlined the conditions in the plants. "One of the big issues is safety. We had a worker at Kokomo Casting who got seriously injured. Management doesn't want to spend the money to maintain things properly.

"People are getting hurt, especially with the AWS, because they are too tired. They claim they need it to save money on overtime, but we end up working overtime anyway. TPT workers have no choice. I know TPTs who are working 13-14 hours a day; that increases the risk of injury. I know TPTs who have been hurt but won't tell management because they are afraid for their jobs. At the same time, they can't quit and hope to find another job with comparable pay around Kokomo."

He said that "C" crew under the AWS system faced difficult conditions, working alternating days and evenings. "You are not sleeping enough, and you are slowly breaking down your organs, heart, kidneys. That's why they are doing sleep studies, it is a major cause of death."

He continued, "You see a mist in the air at my plant. What is that doing to your lungs?"

Another major issue is the division of workers into tiers, with tier-two workers earning lower pay and receiving inferior benefits. "The tiers need to go. They should make all TPTs full time with full wages and benefits. They are not part-time workers. In fact, they are in the plant more than I am."

The worker added, "We need to take matters into our own hands." The worker noted the critical nature of FCA's Kokomo transmission operations. "The 8-speed transmission we make goes into every vehicle but the Chrysler Pacifica and the Jeep Grand Cherokee. They are talking about transferring the transmission work to ZF Group that only pays employees $9 an hour topping out at $12. That has to be stopped."

Asked about the broader political issues facing the working class, he responded, "The corporations, politicians and the unions are all for the people with money. All we get are the droppings from the ivory tower.

"The rich people realize that they make all kinds of money on war. They make money on us killing people. That's how we got out of the Great Depression. If you have money, you have the run of the world. They make all the laws, not us. Even the unions are not for us."

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* urges Kokomo transmission workers to initiate the formation of a rank-and-file factory committee independent of the UAW to press their demands for safe working conditions, including the ending of AWS and forced overtime work. These committees should elect representatives from among the most trusted workers to monitor all negotiations to report back to the rank-and-file.

A firm strike deadline must be set and preparations made to win support from workers at all auto plants, parts suppliers as well as broader sections of the working class including Amazon workers and United Parcel Service workers in the US and around the world. Workers interested in participating in such a struggle are encouraged to contact the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*.

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