

“This union is taking food out of my kid’s mouth”

Lear Portage autoworker denounces UAW collusion with management

Marcus Day
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The WSWS urges workers interested in forming rank-and-file committees at their plants to contact us.

It has been two weeks since autoworkers at Lear Corporation’s Hammond and Portage, Indiana seating factories voted overwhelmingly to reject a sellout contract pushed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

Since then, workers’ anger over the UAW’s attempt to ram through a pro-company agreement has only continued to grow. The UAW and Lear, meanwhile, are working behind closed doors to find a way to dissipate opposition and impose a rotten deal, which would maintain poverty wages and the artificial division of workers between assembly and “sub-assembly” categories, who are paid substandard wages and benefits.

After the union’s deal was defeated, UAW Local 2335 called a series of cynical “ratification feedback” meetings between October 18 and 20. Results of the survey obtained by the WSWS indicate that workers are fighting to restore a broad range of concessions previously given up by the UAW. The workers want to eliminate the tiers, restore cost-of-living (COLA) raises, expand paid time off, and unfreeze pension payments. The UAW, however, has no intention of abiding by the democratic will of the workers. This was made clear by Local 2335 President Jaime Luna, who said the deal “is what it is” and claimed that the company cannot afford anything better.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* was recently contacted by “Steve,” a worker at the Portage, Indiana sub-assembly plant. Steve’s name has been changed in order to protect him from retaliation by the company and UAW.

“When I became part of the union, I thought they would fight for my rights,” Steve said. “In the few years since I’ve worked there, that’s completely crumbled. Especially after the last offer, it’s clear they’re in bed with Lear.”

Like many of the workers at the Portage plant, Steve was hired in at rock-bottom wages, making a little over \$12 an hour. Years later, he is only making \$14 an hour. According to data from the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, an hourly wage of \$14.25 is needed to afford a one-bedroom rental in Porter County, Indiana, where Portage is located. For a two-bedroom, \$17.42 is estimated to be needed.

Steve described the initial excitement he felt following the massive strike authorization vote by rank-and-file workers, followed quickly by suspicion when the union announced it had reached a tentative agreement. “In the morning on Wednesday, October 3, they announced that we had authorized a strike by 90 percent. I thought, ‘This is it. We’re going to get what we want, or we’re going to strike.’ Then, that same day, I kid you not, they announced that they had an agreement.

“I’d like some explanation how that happened. Was the deal already in place when we took the vote? We took the strike authorization vote, and for what? It’s never going to be used. They just did it to make us think like they’re doing something.

“Jaime Luna, the president, doesn’t ever come talk to members. The only way you know he’s there is if you see his truck in the parking lot. He never goes through the [hourly] employee entrance. He’ll come in the front entrance, walk through the main office past all the supervisors, go to the union office and just hide there.

Then he'll sneak out the way he came in.

"It's basically the same with the other union reps. I call them his 'minions.' You hardly ever see them. They're essentially working side-by-side with management. Our plant [in Portage] doesn't exist for them.

"We have no voice within our union. Every time we ask a question, we're shut down. It's mindboggling. We're paying these union dues, and we're not given receipts on anything the money's being spent on."

The UAW maintains an atmosphere of harassment, Steve continued, in an attempt to stifle and intimidate critically minded workers. "We're getting yelled at, we're getting chewed out. They don't want people who are vocal and who aren't 'yes' men. They're the ones breaking us down. It's nothing for us to be written up over little garbage. And the union will say, 'You don't have to sign anything. But here's the pen.'

Steve spoke derisively of Sherry Franciski-Dauksza, the vice president of Local 2335, who has attempted to claim that the WSWs's reporting is "lies," while failing to point out any factual inaccuracies. "Sherry butts heads with you on every little thing. She'll block you on Facebook if you ask a question. She goes on vacation whenever she wants. She just bought a new vehicle. And they keep telling us, 'Save your money, save your money. Don't live outside your means.' Well, people need to survive."

Describing the union officials' hostility to workers' needs and aspirations, he said, "All they're looking for is when they're going to take their next trip or vacation, while we're bleeding on the lines night in, night out.

"Over the past three days, we've had these little contract 'feedback' meetings. And Luna's been saying, 'The deal is what it is. The company doesn't have money to give anything else. What's there is there.' Really? Are you saying the company really doesn't have any money? If we go on strike and shut down Ford, Lear is losing \$10,000 a minute.

"We're the only ones who have our own back. Without us, these seats don't get made. We know what we want.

"When Luna posted this stuff about 'our families' and 'my people' getting a better wage, I was like, oh, yeah, I'll be able to afford a new car with this new contract...a Matchbox [toy] car and a new LEGO house.

"In the proposed deal, there would've been a \$500 sign-on bonus. Well, after the luxury tax and the union dips their hand in, I think there would've been about only \$180-200 left. You can spend that in a day, easily.

"There are several people who have to work two jobs. People are trying to provide for their families. We spend more nights at the plant than we do with our families. It's sad. I've missed a lot of important events.

"We're constantly in a battle to make ends meet. I get about \$385-400 a week, and I have to stretch that to the next payday and hope I have enough to eat and provide for my kid.

"This union is taking food out of my kid's mouth, clothes off their back. We're struggling just to make it day to day."

Steve rejected UAW officials' attempts to slander the WSWs coverage of the struggle at Lear as "lies." He said, "You got it right in your article, it's been a total media blackout. You guys are the only ones putting our voices out there. You have no idea how gratifying it is. I want to thank you for giving myself and others a voice, because without you fighting for the truth we have nothing."

Asked about whether he thought workers should elect rank-and-file committees independent of the UAW, Steve agreed, saying, "We do need an independent committee. If we have an independent group, people could come to us with their issues and to have a voice. If we don't do it, then there's nobody to turn to."



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