

“Those of us who speak out are being blackballed”

UAW carries out campaign of intimidation against Lear auto parts workers

Our reporters
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Workers at Lear Corporation’s Hammond and Portage, Indiana, automobile seating factories have reported that they are facing “backlash” from United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2335 for opposing the union’s efforts to push through a sellout contract and for commenting on articles posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* about their struggle.

Workers at the plants are in the midst of a bitter contract fight. In early October, over 90 percent voted to authorize a strike. Soon after, workers defied the UAW’s attempt to ram through another concessionary contract, which would have maintained the multi-tier wage and benefit system and significantly increased health care costs, voting it down by 74 percent.

Since then, the UAW and the company have maintained a conspiracy of silence, seeking to work out a way behind closed doors to push through the deal. On November 9, the local union officials quietly announced that they had reached a supposedly new tentative agreement. However, the UAW said, no details will be released until “informative meetings” on November 26 and 27, just days before the ratification votes begin on November 29.

Workers have responded with suspicion and anger to the information blackout, with many circulating the article “UAW hides details of new tentative agreement with Lear.” The UAW, for its part, has attempted to smother opposition and keep workers from reading and voicing themselves in the WSWs.

“I pay their salaries for them to bargain for sellout contracts every four years,” a Portage worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. Like a number of other workers, he asked that his name be withheld out of concern he could face retribution from the UAW, which has been hostile to any worker who comments in or about WSWs articles.

“The maintaining of the second tier is the first sign of a sellout, considering they are moving all of us into the same facility,” he said. “In my opinion, that will cause tension between workers due to pay differences.”

Lear is set to open a new plant in Hammond in 2019, in which it will consolidate its current Hammond and Portage operations, which are 20 miles apart from each other. The arbitrary pay differentials between “just-in-time” and “subassembly” workers will be maintained, with workers separated within the plant.

The worker opposed efforts by UAW officials to keep workers from speaking out. “They are under the impression I’m what you call ‘whistle-blowing’ on a union-busting page, but I don’t feel that’s what the WSWs is. You are a way for us workers to use our voice without going through the same union we are having problems with. I do feel we need to make rank-and-file committees to stop this free rein the [union] president has on making very important decision on his own.”

Another Lear worker added, “We’re told we should be grateful Portage opened and that we have jobs, but, in reality, shouldn’t the company and union be grateful for us? The fact is, their jobs are getting done, and for the pay we’re given. We all hope for a good and equal outcome, but I don’t see it happening. A lot of people are looking for new jobs because of this contract.”

The worker also asked for his identity to be withheld because he had experienced “backlash for commenting” on *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* articles on Facebook. “It might be making some people mad, but thank you for speaking the truth for us. It’s exactly how we feel,” the worker said.

The UAW has combined its attempts to silence workers with lies and censorship. Following the rejection of the first company-union deal, Local 2335 deleted a photo of the ballot count, which it had posted to its own Facebook page and which had attracted numerous comments by workers denouncing the contract.

Over the weekend, WSWs reporters visited Lear’s plants in Portage and Hammond to interview workers. After speaking to several outside the Hammond plant, the

reporting team was confronted by a group of company personnel who, while refusing to identify themselves, angrily accused WSWs reporters of “interfering with the bargaining process.”

This only underscores the fact that management is relying on the UAW to do its dirty work.

During the last contract negotiations in 2014, the UAW called a phony 24-hour strike and then pushed through a pro-company deal, which officials from the UAW International and local falsely claimed would eliminate the tier system. In reality, the UAW agreed to the reclassification of hundreds of positions as “subassembly.”

Nearly 200 of the former second-tier workers were transferred to the new Portage facility, with about another 100 drawn from CSG, a contractor for Lear. Starting wages remained at \$11 an hour at the beginning of the contract and were capped at \$15.25—less than the \$16 an hour that workers previously made. The UAW cynically claimed it had upheld the principle of “equal pay for equal work,” because the new third tier of workers would perform different duties.

In the current round of negotiations, Lear management is once again relying on the UAW to impose its dictates. However, management is increasingly alarmed that workers are accessing information and voicing themselves outside the confines of the union.

“We’re never told anything,” another Lear worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “Those of us who do speak out and voice our opinion on what the union is trying to do, we’re constantly being shut down and blackballed.”

Referring to the upcoming union meeting and ratification vote, he said, “People are being split down the middle. We now have two separate ‘informational’ meetings. The Portage plant meeting will be in Chesterton, the Hammond plant at the Dynasty Banquet.”

The union was employing divide-and-conquer tactics, he said, by keeping workers from the two plants from meeting together. “It’s essentially what the figureheads in the union want. The last time we got together, everybody agreed this was a bunch of garbage. They think they can use their positive spin to keep the two plants from coming together. They’re playing a very good game of human chess with us.

“Something is not right here, and it needs to be brought to the forefront. Why are we doing three days of voting at the new Hammond plant? It’s shady. They’re making this an inconvenience on everybody. They’re just concerned with getting the contract through. The pride I had in the union when I started has gone away. Now it’s more of a bitter anger.”

Summing up, he told the WSWs reporters, “Continue to fight for us. We appreciate what you’re doing.”

Both Lear and the UAW are deeply hostile to the rights of workers to read and discuss what they want, and to organize to fight for it. Workers are deeply opposed to their attempts to push through a contract that will entail another half-decade of poverty and daily degradation.

All over the world, workers have increasingly found they are engaged in a battle not just against the gigantic corporations, which hold dictatorial control over every aspect of their lives, but against the trade unions like the UAW, which are steeped in corruption and function as tools of corporate management.

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* has urged workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the UAW and to form rank-and-file committees to fight for good jobs and decent working conditions. Lear workers should immediately demand joint meetings of Hammond and Portage workers, full access to the entire contract, not just the union’s self-serving “highlights,” and sufficient time to study and discuss it before any ratification vote.

Workers throughout the auto industry, who face their own contract battle next year, have been following the fight of Lear workers with intense interest. Every effort must be made to establish lines of communication between Lear workers and their brothers and sisters at GM, Ford, and Fiat Chrysler to prepare the groundwork for a common struggle.

A central responsibility of rank-and-file factory committees must be to organize collective opposition to censorship and intimidation by the UAW and the corporate bosses and to uphold the basic democratic rights of all workers to freely speak their minds, access information, and organize independently to defend their jobs and livelihoods.



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