

“If the UAW was bought, we should get it all back”

Former UAW vice president pleads guilty to conspiracy in bribery scheme

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Norwood Jewell, the former vice president of the United Auto Workers, appeared before a federal judge in Detroit Tuesday afternoon and pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to violate labor laws prohibiting companies from paying union officials bribes and union officials from accepting them.

Jewell is the highest-ranking UAW official caught thus far in the corruption case, which involved the payment by Fiat Chrysler (FCA) executives of more than \$1 million in bribes to top UAW negotiators in return for signing pro-company contracts between 2007 and 2015. Jewell led efforts by the UAW in 2015 to force 37,000 Fiat Chrysler workers to accept sweeping concessions that were also imposed on another 100,000 General Motors and Ford workers.

Corporate money was funneled through the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center, and UAW officials were issued credit cards to keep them “fat, dumb and happy,” in the words of a company official, as they agreed to slash wages and increase the exploitation of workers.

Federal prosecutors established that Jewell used or authorized other UAW officials to use the NTC-issued credit cards to charge more than \$40,000 on travel, upscale restaurants and golf resort accommodations in Palm Springs, California. This included a \$6,912.81 dinner at London Chop House in Detroit on September 17, 2015 to celebrate the deal the UAW reached with FCA. The celebration, however, was premature, as FCA workers voted down the sellout deal by a 2-to-1 margin.

Standing before US District Court Judge Paul Borman, Jewell, 61, presented himself as an honest individual who made a few technical mistakes by charging expenses to the NTC instead of the UAW. “I wasn’t perfect. I missed things,” he said.

In his plea agreement, Jewell acknowledged that FCA executives were bribing UAW officials, but it was “never his intent to be influenced in any way by FCA executives,” he told prosecutors. In particular, “his decisions during the 2015 collective bargaining negotiations were not affected by the activity,” Jewell claimed.

In 2015, Jewell earned the hatred of thousands of autoworkers for leading the UAW’s campaign to push through the agreement on behalf of FCA management. “If the membership had known then what they know now,” Angela, a Fiat Chrysler worker from Kokomo, Indiana, said, “they would have stormed the stage, taken him out back and tuned him up. He was so arrogant when he came here with the phony ‘highlights’ and tried to sell us that rotten deal.”

Federal prosecutors are recommending that Jewell serve only 15 months in prison, though he could have received a five-year prison sentence and a \$250,000 fine. The wrist-slap punishment may indicate that prosecutors hope to wrap up their case soon and declare their work of “cleaning up” the UAW completed.

The light sentence could also be in exchange for Jewell’s cooperation in fingering even higher UAW officials. Jewell, previously identified by prosecutors as “UAW #3,” may have already implicated former UAW president Dennis Williams or current president Gary Jones. Jewell’s administrative assistant, Nancy Johnson, who has already been convicted, told prosecutors that Williams approved the illegal use of NTC cards to cover UAW expenses.

The US Justice Department may impose some type of federal supervision over the UAW, similar to the 1989 takeover of the Teamsters union on the basis of racketeering charges. Such a move by the Trump

administration would not be carried out to strengthen workers against the auto companies. On the contrary, it could be used force workers into a drawn-out arbitration or mediation process to prevent a strike.

In a statement following Jewell's plea, the UAW said, "As his plea makes evident today, Norwood Jewell exhibited poor judgment. This is a troubling moment for our organization, and our members are appropriately angry and frustrated." The union claimed that it was implementing "reforms" that will "make sure that transparency and accountability are at the forefront, and will bring this chapter to a close, once and for all."

According to its latest filing with the US Labor Department, the UAW has spent at least \$1,489,223 on legal fees since 2015 to defend officials caught up in the corruption scandal.

In a press conference outside the courthouse, Jewell's attorney Michael Manley referred to his client as a "legend" who "has left a great legacy for the UAW." He claimed Jewell was unsuspectingly thrust into the corrupt atmosphere. "When you get put into a cesspool, you're destined to fail," he said.

When this reporter pointed out that Jewell was taking bribes from FCA when he and other UAW officials imposed the 2015 contract on Fiat Chrysler workers, the lawyer said that was "absurd." He also refused to say whether Jewell had identified who "UAW #2" and "UAW #1" were, saying only that the plea agreement did not compel Jewell to cooperate further.

As shop chairman of Local 659 at GM's Flint Metal Center in 1998, Jewell sold out a 54-day strike, paving the way for the spinoff of GM's Delphi parts division and the destruction of the jobs and pensions of tens of thousands of workers. From 2010 to 2014, he headed UAW Region 1-C and was reportedly a political kingmaker for the Democratic Party, whose politicians handed GM millions in tax cuts while turning a blind eye to the economic and environmental destruction it caused in Flint and other cities. The same UAW-endorsed candidates were deeply involved in the lead poisoning of the city.

On Tuesday, a group of UAW retirees gathered around the Sitdowners Memorial Park in Flint to demand that Jewell's name be struck from the monument honoring the 1936-37 plant occupation that established the UAW as a mass industrial union. They held signs reading "No entitlement to the corruptors" and "If you did the crime you do the time."

Fiat Chrysler workers at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) in suburban Detroit spoke to the WSWS

Autoworker Newsletter about the concessions Jewell and the UAW imposed. "I say, bring back the pensions and start all over before the 2011 and 2015 contracts," a veteran SHAP worker said. "If the UAW was bought, we should get it all back." In the upcoming contract fight, he said, "It will be hard to get [the concessions] back, but if we strike it will send a message."

A younger second-tier worker said he hates that the 2015 contract lifted the cap on the percentage of second-tier workers, who make half the wage of older workers and must work eight years to "max out." The UAW, he said, "was all in on it." He added, "There was supposed to be a 25 percent limit, and everyone hired over that was supposed to have been brought up to traditional pay, but they screwed us."

Angela, the Kokomo worker, concluded, "We have to recognize there is no way we can get a decent contract from the UAW, which is in bed with management and taking bribes. The UAW officials act as if we work for them, like we have two bosses.

"The only way forward is to unite like we haven't done in decades and be prepared to fight like they did in the 1930s. We have to recognize we are the most powerful class and not succumb to fear and the way the powers-that-be divide us, whether it's getting us to hate Mexican workers or turning high seniority workers against TPTs (temporary part-time workers) and lower-wage workers and vice versa. The Mexican workers have shown us the way by organizing independently of the unions and recognizing there is no difference between the union bosses and the company bosses.

"We have to catch up on the learning curve. There is no time to waste, the contracts are only a few months away. It is most important to unite, like we have not done in a very, very long time."



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