

As contract deadline approaches

Faurecia auto parts workers in Michigan speak out on sweatshop conditions

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In the suburb of Saline, Michigan, south of Detroit sprawls the Faurecia auto parts plant, which manufactures seating components and emission controls for Ford. The plant employs approximately 1,100, some driving from as far away as Flint. Their paltry wages and miserable conditions recall an earlier era.

Members of the United Auto Workers, Faurecia workers' contract expires later this month under conditions of a total news blackout by the union.

As the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has previously reported, conditions in the plant are deplorable. Two deaths occurred in the factory in 2018, at least one of them potentially preventable had medical staff been on duty. Employees regularly report to the *Newsletter* on their safety concerns and the unsanitary conditions in the plant, as well as the harsh treatment by company supervisors.

A Faurecia worker we will call Bill said that although he enjoys his work, "the management is bad." According to Bill, who has been at Faurecia for six years, when the company took over the plant from Automotive Components Holdings (ACH) in 2012, workers were told the plant would be updated, that it would be clean and high-tech. "But it isn't clean or high-tech," he said, "and it's getting worse."

One problem Bill pointed to is safety. "The hydraulic presses leak," he said. "Instead of shutting them down and fixing them, they just want to patch them up." Like other Faurecia workers the *Autoworker Newsletter* has spoken to, Bill noted the lack of concern on the part of management for safety and sanitation in the factory, saying it is left to the workers to clean the foul bathrooms and inspect the lines. "They want to put

safety on us. It should be the company's responsibility to make a safe environment for the workers."

Another worker we will call Don said, "Things are getting worse. They're increasing the line speed. They just want to get as much labor out of us as they can."

Bill said that he does not take such matters sitting down, but that complaining to supervisors rarely helps. "Their first thing is to attack you, to write you up." Asked if there is any protection from such unfair treatment, he said, "We do have due process, but if it comes to someone they don't like it goes out the window. And they don't like me. I'm a strong individual. I read my handbook. So they call me 'an angry black man' and 'a monkey.' When I went to H.R. they swept it under the table, and when I went back they said they lost my file."

Such behavior on the part of management at Faurecia is deliberate. It serves to foster divisions among workers as well as to maintain a hostile, adversarial relationship between workers and low-level supervisors, a relationship similar to that between prisoners and guards. "They fire the good supervisors that get along with the workers," Bill noted. "They don't want us on the same side."

Like the vast majority of auto and parts workers the *Autoworker Newsletter* has spoken with, Bill rejects the divide-and-conquer strategy of management and the UAW. When asked about the strikes conducted by over 70,000 workers in Matamoros, Mexico, earlier this year, he said, "I wish I could go down there and support them. They have the same rights as we do." He sees through the attempt to blame layoffs and plant closings in the US on Mexican workers. Of the striking Matamoros workers he said, "If they can do it, we can

do it. That's what they [the bosses] are scared of."

When Bill started at Faurecia in 2013, he made \$11 an hour. Six years later he is paid \$19.70 an hour, a high wage by Faurecia standards. Low wages are typical. Reflecting the general lack of decent-paying jobs, one newer worker encountered by the *Autoworker Newsletter* said he felt lucky making \$13 an hour.

To make ends meet, many Faurecia workers put in "seven 12s," 12-hour shifts seven days a week. These workers sacrifice time for themselves, time with their families as well as their physical and mental health in order to provide the basics for themselves and their loved ones.

With 84 hours a week under hostile supervision in a dangerous work environment with unsanitary bathrooms, Faurecia offers up echoes of 19th and early 20th century sweatshops. It is an open question how far back in American history one would have to look to find human beings, let alone union workers, treated this way by a major industrial employer.

The Saline plant's current contract with the UAW expires late this month, but so far the union has shared no information with workers about its demands or the status of any negotiations that may be underway. "I'm a mechanic," Don said. "It took years for me to learn my job. I have a right to know about my money."

Trust in the union is low among Faurecia workers. When asked whether they believed the UAW would represent their interests in this year's negotiations, a group of three Faurecia workers just laughed. We spoke with Bill shortly after the news broke of UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell's indictment on charges of receiving tens of thousands of dollars in bribes from Fiat Chrysler during contract "negotiations" in 2015. He was disgusted but not surprised by the news. "If you rely on your union, you may as well take off your life vest and sink with the boat," he said.

In June 2015, Faurecia workers were prepared to walk out on strike. The grievance that triggered the move to strike was a new policy by management forbidding earbuds on the factory floor. It was the straw that broke the camel's back. Sitting with their jackets on, waiting for midnight and the expiration of their contract, the workers were approached by a UAW representative and told that an agreement had been reached with management and that they were not to strike. The workers returned to their lines, to their

unsafe conditions and to their seven-12s.

Autoworkers realize that Faurecia is not an aberration, not an isolated instance of industrial abuse in a remote parts plant. They face deteriorating conditions in their own factories. They see emerging safety issues, unreasonable line speeds, and union "representation" that is opposed to the interests of workers. In the hated tier system, the employment of temporary part-time workers, and the collapse of their pay scale, autoworkers see the future standard in the auto industry in the United States and around the world.

The answer to this crisis, for workers at Faurecia and throughout the auto industry, is the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the crooked UAW. To this end, the *Autoworker Newsletter*, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have initiated the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees, which will join and coordinate efforts by workers across all industries with the express aim of orchestrating a general strike. Only through such independent and coordinated action can workers oppose the forces of capitalism, reaction and war.



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