

Autoworkers determined to fight as UAW contract deadline approaches

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The September 14 contract deadline is fast approaching for more than 150,000 hourly workers at Ford, GM and Chrysler operations in the US.

The United Auto Workers union is embroiled in an expanding corruption probe, which last week produced an indictment against Michael Grimes, the former administrative assistant to union vice presidents Joe Ashton and Cindy Estrada. Grimes is accused of extorting nearly \$2 million in kickbacks for union-branded apparel contracts purchased by the UAW-GM Human Resources Center. According to inside sources, Ashton is the unnamed “Union official 1” in the indictment who collaborated with Grimes in many of these schemes.

In an effort to get ahead of the growing anger of workers, the UAW is calling strike authorization votes throughout the country. Fiat Chrysler workers at Sterling Heights Assembly in suburban Detroit, Belvidere, Illinois and other FCA locations are scheduled to vote on Thursday and Friday, with votes by GM and Ford workers planned next week.

A fighting mood is rapidly taking hold among autoworkers. The UAW, which has forced through one concessions contract after another for three decades, is opposed to mobilizing workers in a genuine struggle against concessions. If a strike does take place, the union will do everything it can to limit it to toothless “Hollywood strikes” lasting a few days or even hours at one or two plants. Industry publications like *Automotive News* have floated the idea of a limited strike to allow workers to blow off steam in advance of another sellout.

Several workers who wrote in to the WSWW *Autoworker Newsletter* commented on the UAW corruption scandal. “We should start from scratch, since we were blatantly sold out,” one worker told the

Autoworker Newsletter. “If there is anyone left that still trusts the UAW, they’ve got to be an idiot. What has been happening to us is nothing more than legalized extortion, since we get nothing in return for our dues. It’s an outright slap in the face.”

“I hope UAW Ford goes under investigation [next],” a former skilled trade worker added.

A Canadian autoworker wrote in to say: “Unifor in Canada in the auto sector has the same [type of] agreement as the USA. I’m wondering if Unifor in Canada has the same scandal going on where they were bought off.”

The union, corporate management and the media have been a wall of silence around the ongoing “negotiations” for a new labor agreement. The reason is that the parameters of the deal have already been reached and the only issues that remain are how to push another pro-company deal past a rebellious workforce. Workers are determined to recoup years of lost wages and overturn the hated two-tier wage system, which forces workers to labor eight years before reaching top pay.

Since President Obama’s bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler in 2009, which included slashing the wages of new hires in half and other sweeping concessions, the auto companies have made a decade of record profits. Though flush with cash, the companies and the Wall Street investors behind them are determined to force workers to pay for falling sales, the threat of another worldwide economic recession and the cost of new technologies like electric and self-driving vehicles. Among their demands are further expansion of low-paid temporary and contract workers and the gutting of workers’ health care benefits.

A fourth-generation skilled Fiat Chrysler worker at Warren Truck Assembly Plant told the *Autoworker*

Newsletter, “They are getting all the higher-paid people out and filling in with Temporary Part-Time workers (TPTs). The younger generation will never get the benefits the older generation had.” Among full-time workers, the lower-paid second-tier workers now outnumber the first-tier workers in his plant, he said.

Expressing contempt for the UAW officialdom, he said, “Union elections are a popularity contest, not based on competence. When a union official asks me for my vote, I try to ask about their program and they walk away and shake someone else’s hand. They don’t work their jobs and have their hands in each other’s pockets. I haven’t seen a steward work their job in my entire career.”

He continued, “The company even buys off the stewards and committeemen. They would sell their mother. At [Warren Truck] the line had been slowed down, now it is sped up and over-cycled. It’s like a meat grinder ... The ergonomics team is non-existent, and there are lots of potential for injuries. Safety is degraded.”

During the 2009 restructuring, President Obama made an appearance at the plant. “It was a scam,” he said. “The companies gave them a grocery list of what they wanted to become more profitable, and employees never saw anything come back when they regained profitability.

“My father and grandfather, when they went on strike, the purpose of the greater good outweighed the monetary loss ... I taught my kids that the person changing the garbage is as important as a doctor,” the worker concluded.

Ed, a Fiat Chrysler worker with eight years at the Kokomo Transmission plant, told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “We need to end the tiers and get our COLA (Cost of Living adjustments) back. We are going to have to shut down the Big Three to get it. It’s ridiculous that it takes eight years to make top wage when the companies are making record profits.”

Referring to the corruption scandal rocking the UAW, Ed said, “It’s just the tip of the iceberg that has come out. It’s from the International down to the local level. Right now, management is going throughout the plant and walking workers out on the flimsiest excuse, like not wearing your safety glasses or ear plugs. They are getting suspended for 30 days. That really hurts but the UAW won’t do anything about that. This happens

before every contract to intimidate workers.”

If there is going to be a fight, rank-and-file workers will have to initiate it. The most dangerous thing would be to have a wait-and-see attitude towards the UAW. Instead workers should build rank-and-file factory committees to advance their own demands and prepare a national strike. However, it is not possible to wage a successful fight if it is limited to the Detroit Three auto companies in the US. The transnational corporations have a global strategy to pit workers against each other and shift production to the lowest cost areas. That is why workers need an international strategy to coordinate the struggles of workers throughout North and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

Over the past 18 months there have been a wave of strikes by auto and auto parts workers, from Romania and the Czech Republic to Germany, Turkey and the UK, and the revolt of the maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico. The fight for the unity of the working class requires a politically conscious rejection of the economic nationalism promoted by the UAW, the Trump administration and the Democrats, and their counterparts throughout the world, which are seeking to divide and weaken the working class and dragoon workers behind their trade war and militarist policies.

After discussing the growing wave of auto and auto parts struggles, from Mexico to India and China, the Kokomo, Indiana Fiat Chrysler worker said he agreed with unifying workers internationally and coordinating the struggles of workers all over the world against the transnational corporations. “It’s going to have to be across all borders to shut these companies down and win what we need,” he concluded.



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