

“There’s a lot of people who are ready to get rid of them”

GM Wentzville workers speak out against UAW corruption

Marcus Day
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With the clock ticking down to the September 14 contract expiration for 155,000 General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers and strike votes being taken across the US, autoworkers are increasingly ready for a fight.

The looming contract deadline comes in the midst of new revelations in the corruption scandal involving United Auto Workers officials. Joe Ashton, a former UAW vice president who sat on GM’s board of directors until December 2017, was identified last week by the *Detroit News* as “Union Official 1” in federal prosecutors’ latest indictment. His former assistant in the UAW-GM department, Michael Grimes—who was on the 2011 and 2015 bargaining committees—has been charged with money laundering and wire fraud as part of his alleged role in a \$2 million-kickback scheme.

The expansion of the corruption scandal to UAW officials for GM has brought simmering worker anger over decades of union-enforced concessions to the surface.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* recently spoke with workers at GM Wentzville Assembly in the St. Louis, Missouri, suburbs, along with residents of nearby Ferguson, Missouri, on the fifth anniversary of the police murder of Michael Brown.

The St. Louis area was once the largest center of automotive production outside Detroit, home to plants by each of the Big Three. However, with the closure of Ford’s Hazelwood plant in 2006 and the shutdown of Chrysler’s two St. Louis plants in the course of its restructuring in 2008-2009, thousands of workers were laid off. GM’s Wentzville plant is the only one to remain.

Similar to Detroit, St. Louis—under Democratic and Republican administrations alike—has suffered decades of deindustrialization and population flight, losing more than *64 percent* of its residents from 1950 to 2018, falling from a high 850,000 to just over 300,000 as of last year. Over one in five in the city are officially defined as living in poverty.

As with Fiat Chrysler’s promises of investments in the Detroit area, GM is holding up the possibility of spending \$1 billion in upgrades at the Wentzville plant with the aim of blackmailing autoworkers to accept new concessions—in healthcare, wages and the use of temporary workers—in the upcoming contracts. The Missouri legislature has already passed a tax incentive package of at least \$50 million to entice GM.

A worker at Wentzville with several decades at GM told the *Autoworker Newsletter* about her bitter experiences with the UAW. “I have seen a lot and a lot I don’t like. These are people’s lives and future in their hands. This is a serious thing.

“I’d never worked in a factory before when I started here.” she continued. “What I saw going on in the beginning [in the UAW], I didn’t want to be a part of. In my years at the plant, I’ve only been to a couple meetings.”

Speaking on the charges against former UAW official Michael Grimes, who is charged with receiving kickbacks from vendors producing union-branded sportswear, she said, “We were supposed to get watches one year, jackets and last year a sweatshirt. They had us all come and get fitted for them ... we have still not received them nor any explanation when we would get them.

“It was said that the president of our local was

involved in some financial scandal at Chrysler and got off. Folks were wondering how he got elected in our union with that type of scandal,” she said.

Grimes also served as administrative assistant to the current UAW-Fiat Chrysler vice president, Cindy Estrada, who is reportedly under investigation in the corruption scandal. Estrada, who has a long record of working out backroom concessions deals with the auto companies, is despised by workers at GM and FCA alike. In 2016, when she was then UAW vice president for GM, Estrada was blocked by workers at Wentzville from joining their Facebook group. The year before, Estrada rammed the GM contract through despite a rejection by skilled tradesmen.

“There’s a lot going on right now,” the worker continued, “with the plant closings [at GM Lordstown, Ohio and elsewhere] earlier this year. We’ve been getting people from Ohio. Some of them have a lot of years, and are at the end of the career, and now they have to start all over again. We had two people who killed themselves. Another lady got sick, and she just died. You don’t know what they’re going through.

“A big issue is with hiring temps. We have ‘temporary’ people who have been there four years! The temporaries may not get hired permanently because of the people coming from Ohio.

“Our union, they lie. They cheat. It’s not fair. There’s a lot of people who are ready to get rid of them, cause they’re not doing anything for us.”

Another veteran worker at Wentzville recently told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “It has been proven that the UAW union has lost the number one principle: of protecting and fighting for the best for union members. We are owed the right to a seat at these private negotiations. It’s the production workers who sacrifice our time and effort to put out GM’s products.

“The union has developed the reputation of selling out the masses of production workers for a few pieces of gold and silver.

“We are tired of GM’s excuses about the downturn of the economy. GM has been thrown a lifeline constantly and gets to profit off the taxpayers, past, present and future. It’s time GM compensate and pay us better wages, A-1 healthcare and more for saving them when they needed us most.”

While at Wentzville, reporters for the WSWS met a regular reader and supporter of the *Autoworker*

Newsletter. She said: “I *always* read it. I’m on top of everything right now. I’m not missing anything. I enjoy this newsletter, this is great. I just read about [Michael] Grimes and [Cindy] Estrada this week. It just came out. I follow you guys. I go on there and check because they [the UAW] won’t tell me anything. I asked, ‘What’s the update?’ They said, ‘Oh it’s gonna be a lo-o-o-ong time.’

“I said, ‘Yeah that’s ok, I’m gonna get it from the WSWS.’”

Holding up a copy of the *Autoworker Newsletter* print edition, she said, “With this, I could have a whole army with me after I get done saying something.”



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