

Autoworkers conclude near-unanimous strike votes as corruption scandal targets charity run by UAW president

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31 August 2019

In two weeks, the contracts covering 155,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler autoworkers in the United States will expire. A battle is looming, pitting workers against the companies, their Wall Street backers and the corrupt criminal syndicate that is the United Auto Workers.

Strike votes carried out over the past week have registered the determination of autoworkers to fight. Nearly unanimously, workers in Michigan, Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee and Kentucky have voted by margins that range from 94 to 99 percent to authorize a strike.

The latest votes follow those previously announced. Chicago Ford Stamping voted for strike authorization by 98.4 percent to 1.5 percent, with only 10 workers voting “no.” At GM Components Holding in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the “yes” vote was 95 percent for production workers and 99 percent for skilled trades workers.

The UAW has yet to release final figures, but the outcome is clear.

These are not, however, votes of confidence in the UAW, which is universally hated. One worker from Fiat Chrysler’s Tipton, Indiana transmission plant expressed the general sentiment: “We are told nothing. We have been lied to so much because of the international union allowing the workers to be treated like farm animals. The company and union care about nobody except themselves.”

On the eve of the contract expiration, the UAW is facing an unprecedented crisis, as federal investigations into its corrupt relations with the auto companies reach the highest level of the apparatus.

Following Wednesday’s FBI raid on the house of UAW President Gary Jones and five other locations, the *Detroit News* reported on Friday that Jones is being investigated “for a range of potential crimes, including financial

dealings involving the nonprofit charity he founded and whether he or other union officials spent member dues on junkets to California.”

The *News* reported that Jones’ nonprofit, set up in August 2014, received \$20,000 from a charity linked to Joe Ashton, the former UAW vice president who prosecutors say took \$550,000 in kickbacks in a scheme involving the UAW-GM Human Resources Center in Detroit.

Michael Grimes, a former top aide to Ashton and current UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada, has already been indicted for taking \$2 million in kickbacks from vendors.

According to the *News*, federal agents “searched the home of Vance Pearson, who served on the board of directors overseeing Jones’ charity. Pearson succeeded Jones as the head of UAW Region 5 near St. Louis last year. Agents also searched the UAW Region 5 office in Hazelwood, Missouri. Jones’ charity was registered to the office building.”

Pearson is reportedly being investigated for his involvement in “flower” slush funds controlled by UAW executives ostensibly for the purpose of buying flowers for autoworkers’ funerals. The *News* reports that “investigators are questioning whether UAW leaders threatened to send high-level staffers back to the assembly line if they failed to contribute to so-called flower funds controlled by union presidents, vice presidents and regional directors, three sources familiar with the investigation said.”

Another focus of the corruption investigations is former UAW President Dennis Williams, whose home was also raided on Wednesday.

In a plea deal in July 2018, top assistant to former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, Nancy Adams Johnson,

said that Williams directed UAW executives to use training center money to pay for “lavish meals and other entertainment costs of senior UAW officials and their friends, families and allies,” including at the UAW “training center” in Palm Springs, California.

The web of corruption that extends throughout the UAW apparatus is the product of its transformation into an instrument of corporate management, working in close collaboration with the auto companies to force through concessions contracts, impoverish the workers it claims to represent, and loot their health care and pension funds.

It is now forty years since the bailout of Chrysler in 1979, during which the UAW and AFL-CIO agreed to massive concessions. The union-backed operation marked a critical turning point, setting into motion a national and international restructuring of class relations and the full-scale integration of the unions into corporate management and the state.

As the UAW implemented concessions contract after concessions contract, isolating and suppressing every effort of autoworkers to resist the destruction of jobs, wages and benefits, it transformed itself into UAW-GM, UAW-Ford and UAW-Chrysler. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the corporate-funded “training centers” emerged as a nexus of the corrupt and incestuous relationship between union and corporate management.

A vast and unbridgeable chasm exists between workers and the privileged executives who control the UAW and other unions. Amidst signs of a new economic downturn, a global restructuring of the auto industry, and an intensification of the assault on workers’ jobs, wages and health care, this chasm is threatening to erupt in mass social struggle outside of the stranglehold of the UAW.

This is the great fear of the ruling class. The *Detroit News*, which has close ties to the auto companies, in an editorial published on Friday, urged Jones to step aside in the current contract “negotiations.”

The *News* warns, “After a decade-long stretch that saw record profits pouring into automaker coffers, autoworkers are expecting a significant bump in their financial package.” At the same time, however, “the companies are seeing economic red flags ahead, largely because of uncertainty about trade policies, and are reluctant to commit to significantly higher labor costs.”

The conflict between the demands of workers and the companies adds “complexity” to the contract talks, the *News* states, requiring “capable and uncompromised leaders on both sides of the table. ... Members can’t have confidence that Jones is acting in their best interests, or

that any contract proposal he brings to them is untainted by the gifts, favors and cash that have flowed to UAW officials for years.”

The *News* is whistling past the graveyard. There is no faction of the UAW apparatus that enjoys the “confidence” of workers. The entire organization is “tainted” not just by the corruption exposed by federal investigation, but by its decades-long collaboration with the auto companies.

At the same time, the Trump administration may move to utilize the corruption scandal to push the UAW aside through some process of trusteeship or forced arbitration, which could include a ban on strikes. This would place autoworkers in direct conflict not only with the company and the UAW, but also with the state.

Whatever the maneuvers of the UAW and the ruling class, the urgent task of autoworkers is to intervene independently by establishing their own organizations. To the corporate-UAW conspiracy, workers must respond with the formation of rank-and-file factory committees in every plant.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* calls on autoworkers to immediately organize meetings of all workers—including first- and second-tier, temporary part-time and contract workers—but excluding UAW officials.

Factory committees will allow workers to formulate and advance their own demands and prepare strike action to fight for them.

Autoworkers have powerful enemies. Behind the auto companies stand the Wall Street investors and the bought-and-paid-for politicians in the Trump administration and in the Democratic and Republican parties.

But autoworkers have even more powerful allies—workers throughout the United States and around the world who have begun to fight back. A stand taken by autoworkers in the US will win the support of workers throughout the country and internationally who are fighting the same transnational corporations.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* is holding its next online forum Thursday, September 5, at 7:30 p.m. EDT, to discuss organizing rank-and-file committees to fight for workers’ interests internationally. Register today to join the discussion.



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