

# Who is UAW Vice President Terry Dittes?

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As the strike by 48,000 General Motors workers approaches its fifth week, an effort is underway to refurbish the union's battered image to better enable it to force through a sellout.

On October 9, the Detroit *Free Press* published a fluff piece on UAW Vice President Terry Dittes, the lead negotiator in the contract talks with General Motors. Titled, "The UAW officer leading the talks with GM is from the assembly line and ready to fight," it presents Dittes as a regular "blue collar guy" who is untainted by the corruption endemic to the UAW bureaucracy.

Apart from the fact that Dittes pulled down a tidy paycheck totaling \$235,873 in 2018, courtesy of UAW members' dues, the attempt to portray him as a working-class fighter is absurd. Dittes' biography makes clear he has never been anything else than a loyal hand-raiser for the corrupt Solidarity House bureaucracy in Detroit.

Moreover, Dittes is now promoting anti-Mexican demagoguery, insisting that GM shift production from Mexico to the United States. This is aimed at breaking the cross-border solidarity between American and Mexican workers, demonstrated by the courageous stand taken by Mexican workers at GM's Silao Complex in defense of strikers in the United States, for which the company has victimized many. It is also aimed at presenting the major concessions which the UAW plans to enforce as necessary to bring back "American" jobs from the other side of the border.

According to the UAW's website, Dittes was originally hired at the Fisher Body Plant in Trenton, New Jersey, and later transferred to the GM Parts operation at Bensalem, Pennsylvania. There he was first elected as an alternate committeeman and then shop chairman in 1992.

In 1999, Dittes was appointed to the UAW Region 9 staff, where he served under then-assistant director Joe Ashton. In 2006, Ashton was appointed Region 9 director before later becoming UAW Vice President for GM. Dittes himself was later appointed Region 9 director in 2014.

Ashton has emerged as one of the key figures in the

UAW corruption scandal. Michael Grimes, Ashton's top aide during his time as vice president, has been charged with receiving \$1.99 million in kickbacks from suppliers of UAW promotional merchandise such as jackets and watches. Ashton was named by inside sources as the "UAW official 1" in Grimes' federal indictment, who prosecutors say took \$550,000 in kickbacks in an illegal scheme involving training funds from the UAW-GM Human Resource Center in Detroit.

In January 2018, Dittes replaced Norwood Jewell as UAW Vice President for Fiat Chrysler. Jewell himself later pleaded guilty to accepting illegal payments from management and sentenced to 15 months in prison.

Dittes was later shifted to the post of UAW Vice President for GM, replacing Ashton's successor Cindy Estrada. Estrada is also a person of interest in the corruption investigation and also employed Grimes as her top lieutenant.

In other words, contrary to the "squeaky clean" image of him promoted by the *Free Press*, Dittes' career has brought him into the closest contact with known and suspected criminals. There is no evidence that Dittes ever raised even the most minimal objections to the rampant corruption around him. Moreover, while Dittes has not yet been named in any federal indictments, it strains credulity to believe that Dittes himself was not also involved in the criminal activity which is universal within the UAW bureaucracy.

Region 9 itself was by no means free from corruption. In New York state the UAW set up a shady operation designed to funnel government training funds into the coffers of the union. It established the "International UAW Region 9 New York Training Initiative," a nonprofit organization whose purpose was to train Perry's Ice Cream workers on "new equipment and technology."

The State of New York Department of Labor was the sole source of funding for the operation. The two-person board of directors for the Training Initiative was comprised of former UAW presidents Dennis Williams and Bob King.

According to Thomas Adams, a former GM autoworker from Flint who is an expert on UAW finances, “The Training Initiative designated Perry’s Ice Cream Company as the training contractor for its own workers. The state of New York provided \$939,840 in training grants to the Training Initiative in 2010, 2011, and 2012. The Training Initiative paid \$579,463 to Perry Ice Cream to train 127 workers during the same period.”

“When Perry’s Ice Cream celebrated its 95th anniversary in 2013,” Adams added sarcastically, “the firm must have had the best-trained ice cream makers in the history of making ice cream.”

Dittes’ career on the UAW staff coincided with the destruction of hundreds of thousands of auto jobs and a relentless succession of concessions contracts. This includes the spinoff of GM’s parts division Delphi in 1999. In 2005, as the company faced bankruptcy, Delphi workers had starting pay slashed from \$28 to around \$16.50, with the critical assistance of the UAW.

In 2007, after a brief two-day “Hollywood strike” at GM, the UAW imposed a sellout agreement on workers at the Detroit-based automakers. This included, for the first time, a two-tier wage scale. It also established the Retiree Medical Benefits Trust Fund, a massive slush fund for the UAW bureaucracy financed with auto company stock.

The UAW then forced workers at the former Delphi factories to negotiate separate agreements, in an attempt to force them into a competitive bidding war to enforce concessions agreements. In 2010, when Dittes was still on the regional staff, the UAW threatened workers at the Lockport facility in Region 9 with the loss of their jobs unless they agreed to a wage freeze for production workers, a \$3 an hour cut for skilled trades, and cuts to severance pay from \$40,000 to \$10,000. On top of this the UAW insisted workers agree to cost-cutting changes in work rules.

When workers objected to the cuts, they were told they were “bidding” against other facilities paying \$10 an hour.

In a 2017 article in the *Buffalo News*, Dittes boasted of the UAW’s role in slashing the wages and working conditions of Lockport GM workers to supposedly “save” jobs, telling the newspaper, “It’s not just going to be given to them because they’re part of the GM family.”

“We are being extremely successful in our bids,” Dittes continued, referencing the work rule changes and other concessions the UAW helped impose. “We won almost everything we bid on.”

He went on to praise local UAW officials for riding

roughshod over the opposition of workers. “They’re in elected positions. If they do something that’s not popular, they run the risk of not getting elected again.”

During his tenure at Region 9, the Detroit automakers closed most of their remaining plants on the east coast. In 2005, Ford closed down its Linden New Jersey Assembly Plant, involving the layoff of 950 workers. GM wiped out another 1,100 jobs that same year with the closure of its assembly plant in Baltimore.

Last year, the UAW pushed through a six-year concessions contract covering 6,000 Freightliner workers in the North Carolina cities of High Point, Cleveland, Gastonia and Mount Holly; Atlanta, Georgia; and Memphis, Tennessee. The Freightliner deal was overseen by UAW Vice President Terry Dittes.

Like the auto industry, global truck manufacturers are increasingly investing in electric and autonomous vehicles and are looking to slash labor costs and sharply increase the number of low-paid workers who can be hired and fired at will. In both cases, the UAW is helping the companies to achieve this goal.

The UAW ignored the 98 percent strike vote by Freightliner workers. Instead, it kept them on the job for months past their contract deadline, eventually signing a deal that provided only three percent annual raises or bonuses. The UAW claimed to have ended the hated two-tier wage and benefit system by revamping the so-called wage progression scale. In reality, workers are being laid off before they reach the top of the pay scale, and will have to start all over if they are ever hired back.

No faction of the UAW represents the interests of autoworkers. If the strike is not to go down to UAW-enforced defeat, autoworkers themselves must seize the initiative independent of all factions of the bureaucracy. This is why the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* calls for the formation of rank-and-file factory committees to take the fight into their own hands, expand the strike to Ford and Fiat Chrysler and unify with their class brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada and throughout the world. They must raise their own demands corresponding to their needs, not the profit requirements of the auto companies.



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