

“Temporary workers are human too”

Arlington GM temp worker with cancer speaks out on his firing four days before strike

Evan Blake
29 October 2019

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* recently spoke with Chad Bell, a temporary worker for the last two and a half years at the General Motors Arlington Texas plant. GM fired him four days before the start of the strike, knowing that Chad has renal cancer and was on track to become an in-progression worker eligible for additional benefits.

After filing a grievance, Chad’s position was held in limbo throughout the strike, and at this point he has not been reinstated while the local contract is finalized. At the local United Auto Workers informational meeting last week Chad was only told that he might be re-hired on March 20, by which point he worries that the cancer will have already killed him. His health insurance has been completely terminated since October 1.

Like most temporary workers Chad is deeply upset with the sellout tentative agreement (TA) negotiated between GM and the UAW and released last week. The contract does nothing to improve working conditions or living standards and is designed to create more temporary workers through the buyout of legacy workers and multiple loopholes that allow the company to fire and rehire temporary workers in order to keep them from ever achieving permanent status.

The primary goal for most GM workers during the strike was to eliminate the temp job category and secure equal pay and benefits for all workers. For the UAW, which is a major GM shareholder, the goal was to boost the company’s profitability by expanding the use of temp workers, consigning thousands more to these terrible conditions.

Chad had been holding out the hope that the UAW would negotiate on behalf of temp workers and fight for them to receive the same pay and benefits as in-progression and permanent workers. However, with the ratification of the sellout contract he recognized that the bribed UAW had once again betrayed autoworkers’ aspirations. He declared, “Temps were the target with this TA, but the permanent workers will become targeted when we return to the new model. No one’s jobs are safe moving forwards, the contract as is will not protect any of us from being targeted.”

Chad’s experience at GM and two parts suppliers underscores the precarious state of temporary workers, the most exploited section of autoworkers.

Before working for GM, from 2013-2016, Chad worked for two parts suppliers to the GM Arlington plant: Android Industries and Universal Logistics Holdings. Summarizing his time at Android, he said, “That place is a sweatshop, they drive the life out of people; they did it to me. I had to work 60, 70 hours in order to make a normal salary.” Chad noted that Android didn’t provide air conditioning while he worked there, despite summer temperatures surpassing 100 degrees Fahrenheit in Texas.

In 2016, a family emergency forced Chad to leave work immediately, and shortly thereafter he was fired by Universal with a small severance

package. Chad appealed to the UAW for help, writing to then UAW President Dennis Williams. Williams forwarded the request to then Region 5 Director Gary Jones’ office, which summarily rejected Chad’s plea for help. Both Williams and Jones have been implicated in the ongoing UAW corruption scandal, involving some \$9 million in bribes and illegal payouts to top union officials.

Reflecting on this experience, Chad recalls, “I tried to call the UAW and they kicked me to the curb. I wrote to Williams because I wanted my job back. There was no reason I should have been terminated. They did nothing to defend me in the face of this firing. When I heard Gary Jones’ home had been raided by the FBI, I thought to myself, you reap what you sow.”

After being unemployed for nine months, in March 2017 Chad was offered a position as a temporary worker at the main GM plant in Arlington. The facility produces the company’s most profitable SUVs, churning out roughly 7,500-8,400 SUVs every week, amounting to billions of dollars worth of product each year.

Roughly a year after being hired, in April 2018, Chad suffered what would over time become a debilitating back injury. Under time pressure to change his materials, Chad was pushing a cart that lacked ergonomic wheels, which got stuck in position. He pushed the cart hard in order to move it on time, but in the process strained his back.

Given his prior history with GM and the UAW, and fearful that he would again be fired unjustly, Chad decided not to file an injury report and instead endured the increasing pain in his back.

In our interview, Chad noted, “Two months after my injury I could barely walk. I went to medical at GM and then my own doctor, who said I had two herniated disks in my lower back and in my neck, and that all four were inflamed. From that point on, I started going to get pain management and getting prepared for surgery.”

Like all temporary workers, Chad receives the bare minimum in terms of benefits and could not take extended time off to recover from surgery, as he would be fired. Thus, he labored through the pain as best he could and was prescribed oxycodone and morphine to dull the agony. He has also had minor surgeries to temporarily mitigate the pain. To pay for his treatment he has been forced to take out small loans and has sunk further into debt.

Shortly after his injury, Chad was targeted by management and was placed under greater scrutiny.

In August 2018, Chad had the first of multiple surgeries for his back, and upon returning faced harassment from a GM supervisor. One supervisor forced him to move numerous 100-pound tires during his shifts, despite being aware of Chad’s back problems.

After eight months, Chad was able to schedule time over winter break to have another surgery on his back, to block the afflicted nerves and allow him to continue working. A month later, in January 2019, received the shocking diagnosis that he had renal cell carcinoma on his right kidney, with suspected cancer on his left kidney as well.

Chad realized he could not afford the necessary surgery or take the needed time off to recover. Due to GM's punitive policies towards temps, he has been forced to continue working ever since, in order to try to save money to pay for the cancer surgery.

After learning of his diagnosis, Chad informed his supervisor, who at the time conveyed his sympathies and worked with him to get shifts suited to his needs. On top of working the night shift, where he earned a slightly higher hourly wage of \$19.21, Chad began working overtime as much as possible. Until his firing in September, Chad labored 50-60 hours each week for months, despite the immense pain he experienced from the combined effects of his herniated disks and renal cancer.

While Chad obviously wanted surgery to happen immediately, he was grateful that this supervisor worked with him to increase his pay as much as possible. However, things changed with the possibility of a strike approaching, and this supervisor was replaced by a per-diem one, who quickly gave Chad his first write-up or "strike," after working for GM for two years.

On May 18, 2019, Chad was assigned to a job that he was not familiar with. While working on the line he became dizzy and was experiencing tremendous pain. He started making some minor mistakes. His team leader came over and asked, "If you're hurting so bad, why don't you just go home?" Chad listened to her, and when he got home he measured his blood pressure at 173/116. He called in for federal FMLA time off, which was approved. Nevertheless, GM wrote him up the following day, for what the company deemed "job abandonment."

In June, GM replaced the per-diem supervisor with another, even more ruthless individual, who immediately began targeting temp workers for minor infractions in an effort to fire as many as possible in advance of a strike. Along with hundreds of other workers, Chad was placed under the microscope.

In a journal entry from June 25 Chad wrote, "Rested fully but pain level is still intense, my face has swollen completely from liquids and broken teeth abscesses. No Dental benefits is killing me, alongside cancer and discs. 3:15am still can not sleep due to extreme pain, just laying in bed trying to relax..."

In order to take temporary breaks when the pain became unbearable, Chad relied on federal FMLA benefits. Soon, however, his new supervisor began objecting to this, forcing Chad to abandon this last resort.

A journal entry on August 3 reads in part, "I met with [a coworker] on the way out and expressed my frustration over not having benefits. Basically having General Motors and UAW sign my death warrant without short-term disability. Waiting 7 months after cancer diagnosis to be signed in under national agreement is insane. Discussed forming Temporary Workers Union to represent the Temps, just as an option to have our voices heard (Sounding board of ideas as we have rights to freedom of expression without retaliation) It was brought to my attention the company would retaliate and my discussion could have me terminated. I was like I'm dying already without help or a cure at the directives of General Motors, I got Cancer with no help."

Ten days later, Chad received his second "strike," allegedly for "failing to torque alternator," which he denied. By that time, his new supervisor had begun spending up to 30 minutes observing workers at their stations to try to catch any potential violation of the rules. Chad notes that during this time the new supervisor "destroyed our line and many people have left because of him." Chad estimates that at least 100 workers at his plant were fired in the month before the strike, with the vast majority being temp workers.

On September 9, Chad worked another 17-hour shift. At the end of his grueling shift, the latest of dozens of such marathon shifts, he was called into management's office and given his third "strike" for alleged "careless workmanship," and was discharged. He responded by filing a grievance through the UAW. In the recent period, Chad feels that his local UAW leadership has been supportive, particularly his current local chairperson, although he recognizes the criminality of the national and international union leadership.

Chad's health continued to deteriorate during the strike. He stated, "My back, one of the herniated disks has collapsed completely, I'm now rubbing bone on bone. I take so much medicine, I get the injections, but it doesn't work. Where the cancer is, my kidneys and my back, they're rubbing each other, it's causing me so much pain. Trying to build a vehicle every 58 seconds, it takes 2.5 hours for my medicine to kick in, so the first 2.5 hours of a shift I'm not even there."

Chad joined his coworkers on the picket line, and felt that the strike had immense potential to win greater benefits for all workers, especially temps. If he is not re-hired until March, he faces the prospect of working at least six more months after that until being hired as an in-progression worker and being able to cover the costs of his surgery to remove the cancer. He worries that this will be too late, and is seeking legal aid to take on GM and ensure that the company pays for his medical bills.

Over the course of his time at the company, he has amassed over \$100,000 in debt, and is considering filing for bankruptcy. When Chad was diagnosed with cancer, his daughter set up a GoFundMe page to help raise funds for his treatment, and he asks for those that are able to make a donation to this fund.

Reflecting on his firing, Chad stated emphatically, "They targeted me, everyone told me they were. My supervisor stood there for 30 minutes at a time until I messed up. Everything points to them targeting me. The way they did it put me in a terminal situation. They put me in a position where I may end up on dialysis or dead in the near future."

Chad strongly felt the need to speak out, both for justice in his own case and for those of his coworkers. He stated, "I'm doing this for anyone out there that may be enduring the same thing, and other temporaries or permanent employees facing the same thing. I have to speak up for what's right, not for fear of loss but for the courage to try and save someone else's life and the safety of others or someone who is just as fearful and can't speak up."

"My opinion is, GM wants you to be able to go in for three years, learn the process, and either terminate you early and save the money, or break you down so much physically that you're not going to live to full-term retirement."

"Temporary workers are human too. Dental, vision, short term disability, those are protective benefits that are needed to ensure our health and safety into the future, so that we don't have a deteriorated body or full disability before we even get hired in. It's a stacked deck towards guaranteed poor health. No matter temporary or permanent we all deserve better treatment and appreciation for the hard work we do equally across the production line."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact