

With UAW collusion, Ford implements video surveillance of workers at Dearborn Truck Plant

Tim Rivers
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Contrary to repeated assurances from local union officials that this would not happen at “our plant,” Ford Motor Company is moving ahead with video surveillance technology at its Dearborn Truck Plant in suburban Detroit. DTP, which employs 4,400 hourly workers, is a company flagship facility producing the F-150 pickup truck, the best-selling vehicle in North America and source of the vast majority of the company’s profits for the region.

A little over one week ago, United Auto Workers plant president Burkie Morris issued a single-sided news sheet for the month of January. Couched in the usual fluff about benefits, job-postings and new construction is a four-sentence paragraph entitled “New Technology Letter,” which reads:

“The Company will be piloting a ‘First Hour Optimization Program on the Door line’ This program will show the Company who is at work and in position to work when the shift starts. This or any other New Technology can not be used for discipline without the approval of the National Ford Department. The Company will have meetings and information for those teams involved in the pilot.”

With this program, Ford is introducing tracking technology perfected by technology firms such as Amazon, which have used surveillance to track workers’ every movement in real time and impose a draconian system of speed-up and discipline. The program was made possible by a provision in the sellout national agreement which the UAW forced through at Ford last year, shortly after it shut down the strike at General Motors and enforced concessions.

The Ford contract was overseen by then-UAW Vice President Rory Gamble, now interim president after

Gary Jones, implicated in the corruption scandal engulfing much of the union’s top leadership, was forced to resign. Gamble himself has also since been implicated.

Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that during informational meetings prior to the vote, local union officials told them not to worry about the provision, and that the video surveillance would not be used at DTP. This has now been exposed as a lie.

As one worker told the WSWs, “This pilot program is part of the monitoring program which they said would not be implemented at our plant. But this is expanding everywhere.”

Anyone who slows or stops the assembly line because of unsafe conditions, for instance, will risk being disciplined and fired. “If there are stoppages,” he said, “They can play the video back and review everything.”

Another worker at DTP explained the implications of the program. “They will be able to look at everybody’s movements and see if anybody’s job could be increased based on that,” she said. Very skeptical of Burkie’s assurances, she continued, “They are trying to downplay the pilot program. It will just be for the first hour when the shift starts. That’s it,” they claim.

“[But] they call it an ‘optimization’ program. They are going to want to optimize everything, not just the first hour. Why would they stop there?”

The surveillance program is outlined in a letter of understanding which is part of the recent contract, entitled Production Standards and Other Issues, from Kevin Legel, Director of US Labor Affairs for the company, to Gamble. In the online version of the contract “white book,” the letter is buried on pages 412

and 413 of the 769-page PDF document.

A critical passage explains why the company and the union were in a hurry to roll it out before the end of January. “Within 90 days of ratification,” it states, “the parties will mutually agree to identify pilot locations to introduce the technology tools. The National parties will develop a framework for the pilot in order to ensure alignment.” The company was determined not to waste any time.

The clear intent of weaponizing the new surveillance technology as a means of disciplining and firing workers is spelled out in the letter. “The technology will not be used as the *sole* [emphasis added] basis for disciplinary action.” The wording of this statement makes clear that it can, in fact, be used to build a disciplinary case against workers.

The company intends to use the new technology to vastly intensify speedup under the new agreement. The contract language reads: “Utilization of relevant technology to support workstation optimization including digital video recording and walk path mapping devices.”

Implicitly acknowledging that these measures amount to an invasion of the privacy of autoworkers, the letter adds: “The Company will ensure access by authorized personnel and follow existing data privacy policies, including the LOU entitled Privacy-Confidentiality of Personal Data and Information.”

Its role in implementing this technology is further proof that the UAW functions as an industrial police force on behalf of the auto companies. Any successful struggle by autoworkers against surveillance and other forms of management harassment require first of all that workers begin to break free from the straitjacket of the UAW and organize themselves independently. Workers must form rank-and-file committees in every factory to take the defense of workers’ conditions in the shops out of the hands of the corrupt and corporatist unions.



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