“Would any worker want to put his or her child back in the plant?”

GM contract worker victimized over COVID warning speaks about his case

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Travis Watkins, a mechanic and local United Auto Workers bargaining chairman at a General Motors subsidiary in western Michigan, recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about his unjust termination carried out by management in collusion with the UAW. He is seeking reinstatement after being fired last month for raising concerns over COVID-19 cases at his plant.

Watkins is a mechanic employed by Caravan Facilities Management that does work outsourced by GM. He was fired last month from a GM Components Holdings facility for speaking out and warning against the dangers of COVID-19 infections after workers were “walked out of the plant in medical carts and facemasks.”

More than 800 workers are employed at the highly automated GMCH factory, a former Delphi plant that makes engine parts, including gear and drive-line components, and axles for Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra model pickup trucks. The 1.8 million-square-foot facility is located on 95 acres in Wyoming, Michigan.

Watkins was fired March 18, two days after workers were removed from the plant with suspected COVID-19 infections. He had posted comments over the incident in a private Facebook group intended for union members. The post stated, “It’s been confirmed to me that GMCH employees were walked out of the plant with suspected COVID-19 symptoms. ... I’ve reported this to local leadership and ‘crickets.’ (“no response”).

The charge against Watkins was for violating Shop Rule #2: “Assaulting, fighting, threatening, intimidating, coercing, or interfering with employees or supervision.” At the time, workers were not even being supplied with masks or gloves. “I was absolutely dumbfounded. I didn’t assault anybody. I didn’t threaten anybody. I certainly didn’t coerce anybody,” Watkins said, noting that he didn’t interfere with anyone either. “I reported out the facts and the truth. There’s no better defense against slander,” he told the WSWS.

Watkins is bargaining chairman of UAW 167, an amalgamated local, and one of the founders of a group seeking to reform the UAW, Unite All Workers for Democracy, which is supported by the pseudo-left Labor Notes tendency. However, the victimization of Watkins is an object lesson in the futility of attempting to reform the UAW. It was, in fact, the local UAW leadership who helped engineer his firing.

The entire case against Watkins was built around his Facebook post, which was likely made available to management by local UAW officials in clear violation of his rights under US labor law.

The victimization of Watkins was intended as an example to workers under conditions where GMCH and the UAW have announced a return to work starting Monday, April 27, beginning with one shift. In the face of growing opposition in the working class to risking their lives for the profits of the corporations, the aim of Watkins’ firing is to send a message to workers in an attempt to intimidate and silence any opposition to a premature return to work.

“At the time I was fired, I spoke with one woman who was walked out and although she had a fever and a cough, she was not able to get tested. They were not doing very much testing then, and I know it’s still really hard to get tested unless you’re very ill.” According to Watkins, neither the company or the

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union have supplied any information regarding the status of any COVID-19 cases from the plant.

Watkins was fired before the issuing of Michigan's stay-at-home order, which went into effect March 23. At that time, the Centers for Disease Control reported 4,000 cases in the US and 70 deaths. As of this writing there are now 871,000 cases and more than 50,000 deaths in the US.

"This is no longer about me. Workers are scared. You have single parents who are primary caregivers for their children. What conditions are workers going back to? Two face masks a day, social distancing and some markers at entrances, one person at a table in the break rooms, and temperature checks—which mean nothing if you're asymptomatic. Frontline health workers cannot get PPEs, so how do you think it will be for the autoworkers?

"The real issue is, would any worker want to put his or her child back in the plant? It took workers' actions and protests in March to get the assembly plants closed. The union would never have supported that on their own, they were forced to.

"The International UAW joint partnership with the Big Three is to mitigate the profit losses. This coronavirus task force is not to save jobs, but to save profits at the expense of workers' lives. I think the pandemic has torn the mask off. This is it. Socialist issues are becoming more reasonable."

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party oppose the victimization of Watkins and all workers fired for speaking out about safety issues and demand their reinstatement with full back pay. The fight against the threat posed by coronavirus cannot be met by relying on management's UAW stooges, but requires the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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