Facing manpower shortages over COVID-19, UAW president tells workers ‘don’t retire’

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With the COVID-19 pandemic surging across wide areas of the US and new infections setting almost daily records, anger is growing among broad sections of the population over the criminal and homicidal policy of the US political establishment of reopening wide sections of the economy.

In the auto industry new cases are increasing rapidly as GM, Ford, Fiat Chrysler and other companies abandon even the very limited and inadequate safety measures instituted when the auto plants reopened in mid-May. In the face of this disastrous situation, the UAW has been working hand in glove with management to try to tamp down opposition and keep the assembly lines moving at full speed.

Workers may have done a double take when an article appeared Saturday in the *Detroit Free Press* featuring a conversation with UAW President Rory Gamble, currently under investigation by the US Justice Department as part of its corruption probe, expressing concern for retirees.

The article begins with this stark appraisal: “President Rory Gamble has three words of advice for his family and his union brothers and sisters who are contemplating an early job exit: Don’t do it.”

The *Free Press* continued, “Gamble has been around long enough to see what happens when workers exit a job ahead of retirement age without a ‘defined path’ for the future and the financial acumen to stay solvent.”

They then quote Gamble, who says, “They get hit with major disappointment when that package money runs out.” He continued, “Reality sets in and they lose their health care and that leads to declining health, declining mental health and then you combine that with the mental shock and here we are, we get high incidents of folks committing suicide and dying early.”

This is hardly news to workers in Detroit and other Midwest cities who have faced the trauma of being bullied into early retirement by constant threats of mass layoffs. But why the sudden concern for retirees? After all, the UAW has stiffed them in contracts going back decades. Multiple UAW deals have included “voluntary” retirements aimed at helping the companies rid themselves of older, higher-paid workers so they could be replaced with lower wage workers. The UAW has also accepted pension freezes, reductions in retiree health benefits and other measures, which have ensured the early deaths of retirees.

As always, with anything involving the UAW there are mercenary considerations.

In this case it’s pretty obvious. High levels of absenteeism in the plants, including among senior workers with preexisting health conditions, are threatening the production targets of the automakers. Faced with the choice of working under unsafe conditions or staying home to protect their health, many workers are choosing the latter. In addition, workers exposed to COVID are being sent into quarantine. Requests for family medical leave (FMLA) as well as applications for retirement are also increasing.

Because of this, the automakers’ manpower levels are becoming severely strained, despite the hiring of large numbers of temporary workers who are being forced to work 60 hours a week in many cases. A report last week by CNBC warned that auto plants may be forced into shutdowns, at huge economic cost, if the manpower shortage isn’t overcome.

Clearly calls were made and, ever at the beck and call of management, the UAW responded. The *Free Press* and Gamble rushed into print a statement aimed at slowing the exit from the plants. However, few will be fooled.

A few obvious questions explode the whole argument. Why, if Gamble is so concerned over workers’ health and well-being did he not mention the dangers workers face in the auto plants, where dozens of US autoworkers have

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died from COVID-19 and hundreds have been infected? Management and the UAW are attempting to suppress any information about the spread of the deadly disease, refusing to report the number or locations of mass infections. For the most part workers are forced to rely on social media posts to glean whatever information they can.

Because of this, autoworkers at the Jefferson North and Sterling Heights assembly plants in the Detroit area, along with the Toledo Jeep assembly complex, have organized rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-company UAW, to oversee health and safety and protect workers against the pandemic. The call for these committees is being taken up by workers throughout the industry and beyond.

"We have to be organized in rank-and-file committees," said a Sterling Heights worker active in the committee. "Workers in every plant, in the US and internationally, and in other occupations like teachers are going through the same. We all want to be safe."

A Ford worker at the Dearborn Truck plant added, "We can't trust the company or the union. There are at least 10 cases at my plant. All the protocols they claimed were put in place to reopen in May were nothing but band-aids for the media to promote. They're giving us the choice of working and bringing the infection home to our families or staying out and having no income. We can't accept that."

Referring to Gamble's comments, a Fiat Chrysler worker from Jefferson North said, "Workers will see through this. The UAW is helping drive the older workers out. On top of that the retirees are always given the short end of the stick in the contract."

Another worker responded to Gamble with a comment on Facebook. "Only reason we are going to have a loss of health care is because the UAW will not pay for the same level of care," referring to the retiree health care trust fund managed by the UAW. Set up in 2007, to allow the companies to offload their retiree obligations, the multibillion-dollar trust is a slush fund for the UAW bureaucracy, which benefits financially if retired workers die off earlier.

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