

No slave labor, prisoners must go!

Faurecia Gladstone Rank-and-File Safety Committee warns against use of convict labor

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The Rank-and-File Safety Committee at the Faurecia Gladstone plant in Columbus, Indiana has issued a statement denouncing the threat by the company and the state of Indiana to bring prisoners to the factory as virtual slave labor in an effort to counter the resistance of workers to unsafe and inhumane working conditions. The committee was formed last month to fight the spread of the deadly coronavirus, brutal working conditions and the systematic victimization of whistle-blowers, measures that were imposed with the connivance of government safety inspectors and union officials.

Workers reported to the *World Socialist Web Site* last week that the company was threatening to bring inmates from the Marion County Women's Prison to the factory. ABC News reported on April 2 that five prisoners had tested positive for COVID-19 at the prison, where Indianapolis, the largest city in the state and a hotspot for the spread of the pandemic is located, as well as at the Plainfield Correctional Facility in Hendricks County.

"They are killing us," said a delegate from the Faurecia Gladstone Rank-and-File Safety Committee who addressed the network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, which convened on Saturday.

Bringing greetings and support from the Gladstone committee, she told the assembled educators from throughout the United States and other countries that Faurecia was forcing employees to work side-by-side with known carriers of the virus while suppressing vital information about the spread of contagion at the factory. The company imposes 12-hour shifts, seven days a week, covers up injuries and refuses to provide injured workers with basic medical treatment or even to acknowledge the restrictions which their family physicians require. She concluded her remarks by denouncing the use of convict labor, calling for the greatest unity of the working class in struggle.

The union involved has said nothing about this latest outrage, basically offering the global auto parts maker a

blank check to pursue its regime of horrific exploitation. "Don't make waves," International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1424 president George "Frankie" Ledbetter reportedly told a shop steward who was speaking up in defense of workers who were being abused. "We have a good thing going with this company," he added.

"This is slave labor!" declared a founding member of the Gladstone committee when speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* last week. In May, the WSWWS reported that prisoners were hired at \$1.33 per hour, "essentially slave wages," to replace striking sanitation workers in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The use of convict labor, in particular in the post Civil War South, has a long and ugly history in the US.

In the book *American Prison: A Reporter's Undercover Journey Into the Business of Punishment*, Shane Bauer describes conditions in the aftermath of the Civil War. "In Mississippi, 'Cotton King' Edmund Richardson convinced the state to lease him its convicts," he writes. "He wanted to rebuild the cotton empire he'd lost during the war; and, with its penitentiary burned to ashes, the state needed somewhere to send its prisoners. ...With the help of convict labor, he would become the most powerful cotton planter in the world, producing more than 12,000 bales on 50 plantations per year."

During the late 1870s, the death rate for convicts in South Carolina who were leased to the Greenwood and Augusta Railroad averaged 45 percent per year. "In 1870, Alabama prison officials reported that more than 40 percent of their convicts had died in their mining camps," writes Bauer. "There was simply no incentive for lessees to avoid working people to death. In 1883," he continued, "one Southern man told the National Conference of Charities and Correction, 'Before the war, we owned the negroes. If a man had a good negro, he could afford to take care of him: if he was sick get a doctor. He might even put gold plugs in his teeth. But these convicts: we don't own 'em. One dies, get another.'"

In response to the attempt by management to revert to similar brutal methods, the Faurecia Gladstone Rank-and-File Committee issued the following statement:

NO SLAVE LABOR, PRISONERS MUST GO!

Brothers and sisters at Faurecia, throughout Indiana, the US. and around the world:

We formed this Rank and File Safety Committee to protect our lives and those of our co-workers from the deadly coronavirus and from the other hazards we face every day in the plant. Management and the IBEW won't tell us how many people have COVID-19 and they refuse to implement universal testing and safe work practices. They further refuse to back off the brutal regime of back-breaking labor for 12-hours a day, 7-days a week.

They are now ganging up with the State of Indiana to bring inmates from Marion County Women's Prison to work as industrial slaves to retaliate against our just and legitimate efforts to create a safe work environment. We reject this blatant attempt to intimidate us and advance the following just demands:

1. NO SLAVE LABOR! Prison inmates must be removed from the plant at once. Hiring and manning policies must be established and maintained on the basis of equality and under the supervision and control of the rank and file.

2. Faurecia must notify the rank and file of any new cases of COVID-19 and what areas have been affected. This vital information cannot be concealed from us any longer.

3. We demand daily testing for everyone on site with rapid results and the highest-quality health care paid for by the company for any and all family members who become ill. Combined with thorough contact tracing, this is the only way to scientifically control the pandemic's spread.

4. Every confirmed case must be traced and tracked, with a full shutdown of the plant for 24 hours of cleaning and sanitizing under rank-and-file supervision, including consultation with doctors and scientific experts.

5. Inhumane work hours and schedules must end. We cannot maintain health and safety without a return to the eight-hour day in a 40-hour week with full and adequate compensation. We have the right to proper rest, recreation and healthy lives for ourselves and our families.

6. We demand an immediate end to company

efforts at intimidation and victimization of whistleblowers or any workers who point to unsafe conditions or dangerous work practices. As an example, too often women of small stature are compelled to handle heavy, awkward materials and machinery that is not designed for them. This type of abusive and hazardous work practice must stop now.

7. Cancer is too common at Gladstone. The National Cancer Institute states: "Occupational exposure to airborne hexavalent chromium is associated with increased risks of multiple cancers." Warning labels on the barrels of welding wire at the plant specifically name that compound. We have airborne particles throughout the plant day and night. The ventilation is horrible. The HVAC system must be improved to provide clean and comfortable air year round.

8. Whenever conditions are unsafe, we have the right to collectively refuse to work without any threat of retaliation from management or the union.

We call upon workers everywhere to join with us in supporting and building the network of rank and file safety committees to prepare united industrial and political actions to defend the health and safety of all workers, their families and communities. This is a global problem. Everywhere we confront the conspiracy of global corporations, governments and unions. We must build the strongest world network to combine our struggles worldwide, beginning with general strike action against the homicidal reopening of schools.

To join the Rank-and-File Safety Committee at your plant, or for assistance in establishing a Committee, contact the World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact