

Former UAW VP Joe Ashton gets wrist-slap prison term as workers confront rampant COVID-19 in auto plants

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While demands continued to grow in the auto plants for a shutdown of production to stop the growing COVID-19 pandemic, former UAW Vice President Joe Ashton this week received a token 30 month prison sentence for his role in the massive corruption scandal that has engulfed the union. The court delayed the start of Ashton's prison sentence until June due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ashton is the latest top UAW official to be sentenced in a federal investigation that has exposed the union's leadership as a gangster operation, with officials living the high life on company bribes while signing an endless series of sellout deals handing back hard-won gains achieved over decades of bitter struggle. Eleven former UAW officials, along with the wife of one top UAW official, have pleaded guilty so far to receiving bribes and kickbacks.

Ashton pleaded guilty to charges that he pocketed some \$250,000 in kickbacks from vendors on contracts for the manufacture of UAW-branded watches that were never given to union members. Ashton received a wrist-slap prison term that will likely be served at a minimum security, country club-type facility for well-heeled and connected "white collar" criminals.

Ashton was the former UAW vice president in charge of General Motors. After retiring from his well-paid union post, he secured an appointment as the UAW representative on the board of directors of General Motors. Ashton also served on the board of the GM-UAW Center for Human Resources, a nest of UAW corruption that was recently sold under a cloud of scandal. While at the CHR, Ashton steered a \$4 million contract to a friend in exchange for a kickback.

The sentencing was carried out over Zoom to protect against COVID-19 infection. In announcing his decision, US District Judge Bernard Friedman went out of his way to praise Ashton, declaring, "We have to let people know that the criminal justice system is not a system that's only for people on the streets selling drugs and things of that nature. ... Sometimes good people do bad things."

Ashton and his fellow "good people" in the UAW leadership, including former Presidents Gary Jones and Dennis Williams, stole millions of dollars while signing off on massive concessions to the auto companies, the end of defined benefit pensions, the end of cost-of-living raises, and the expansion of super-exploited temporary part-time workers with virtually no rights, subject to dismissal for minor infractions.

In another glaring sign of the disconnect between the unions and the real situation facing millions of workers, the AFL-CIO has tweeted out its Buy Union Made for Thanksgiving list. Included is Tyson Foods, where managers and supervisors ran a betting pool to see how many workers would contract COVID-19.

While consideration is given to Ashton to protect him from COVID-19 infection, no such protection is being afforded to workers in the auto plants. With the full support of the UAW, auto plants are continuing full production schedules even as the COVID-19 pandemic explodes across the industrial Midwest. The Illinois and Michigan governments have been forced to acknowledge that manufacturing plants are major sources of COVID-19 transmission into the broader community but have excluded them from piecemeal lockdown orders in order to keep profits flowing to investors.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has been steadily receiving reports of the violation of basic safety protocols by management with the collusion of the UAW and the systematic cover-up of infections and deaths.

Significant outbreaks have been reported at a whole number of plants, including Fiat Chrysler's Sterling Stamping and Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit. Workers also report significant outbreaks at the Ford Ohio Assembly Plant in Avon Lake west of Cleveland, the Fiat Chrysler Tipton transmission plant in Indiana and the Faurecia Gladstone plant in Columbus, Indiana.

Several workers at SHAP spoke to the *Autoworker Newsletter* about the continued cover-up by the UAW and management of the spread of COVID-19, which has led to at least one death already, Mark Bianchi.

Again and again, workers have referred to the abandonment of even basic safety measures.

One worker said: 'The reopening of the plant was done with a minimal amount of safety measures by the company after the shutdown in March and April. It was not carried out with our safety in mind but to satisfy certain requirements by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and that itself is pretty low.

"One of things which it is really impossible to do at our plant or really with line production is to social distance. When you are putting parts onto the truck, it requires two people to hold the engine or another component and you have to stand near each other unless you want to have a major accident."

He reported that the UAW and management are telling workers to be quiet about COVID-19 cases on the bogus grounds that it would lead to a "panic." He said that workers are being shifted from one department to another to prevent any discussion.

"Right now, things are being covered over and there is a lot of intimidation. I only heard a few days ago about the death of Mark Bianchi and that was from another co-worker, not from a major union announcement."

A skilled trades worker at SHAP said, "People are fed up and anxious and concerned. Workers are fearful of getting sick and their family getting sick.

"People would support a shutdown, but with no federal supplement, just unemployment, workers have financial concerns over a shutdown. They feel they are

between a rock and a hard place. I want them to shut down, but I can't afford to shut down without financial help.

"Workers feel they are being forced to come to work and hope they don't get sick and don't get their family sick. That is the mood here."

He added, "The UAW is not on the floor. There is nothing official about people who may be sick. You just don't see people. You don't see supervisors. We don't hear of anything except through the grapevine."

Another worker said, "I agree wholeheartedly that the plant needs to be shut down. The statistics are speaking for themselves. It is gone from an average of 1,000 deaths a day to 2,000 a day and is totally out of control. I don't even want to think about what will happen after Thanksgiving."



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