

As demands for work stoppage grow, UAW officials tell Sterling Heights Assembly workers: “Don’t read the WSWS”

Shannon Jones

23 November 2020

In the face of growing demands by Fiat Chrysler workers to halt production at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) to stop the spread of COVID-19, local United Auto Workers officials are lashing out at the *World Socialist Web Site* and rank-and-file workers who have turned to the WSWS to expose the deadly conditions at the suburban Detroit auto factory.

Infections have been spreading throughout SHAP, which employs 7,200 workers, and the nearby Sterling Stamping plant, which employs another 2,300. Earlier this month, relatives reported that veteran SHAP worker Mark Bianchi had died of COVID-19. He would be at least the fifth SHAP worker who has died from coronavirus this year. Another two workers have died at the stamping plant.

The response of the UAW has been to help FCA management conceal the number of infections while forcing workers to remain on the job and falsely claiming that adequate safety protocols are in place. In June, SHAP workers and workers at the nearby Jefferson North Assembly Plant carried out work stoppages in defiance of the UAW to protect their lives, and then set up rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW.

The growing anger of workers and their turn to the WSWS to voice their concerns and organize their resistance has terrified the union. On its “UAW Local 1700 Worker 2 Worker” podcast released over the weekend, local union president Louie Pahl and vice president Tavares Oliver repeatedly warned workers against speaking to the WSWS. “This is an anti-union website that seeks to destroy or discredit the union,” Pahl railed. “Don’t believe anything you see or read on social media. Especially this website.”

Their contemptuous attitude towards the life-and-death concerns of workers was revealed when Pahl and Oliver dismissed workers’ inquiries about possible infections as “yada, yada, yada...”

Neither Pahl nor Oliver could cite a single example of any supposed misinformation presented by the WSWS. This only underscores the fact that the two union bureaucrats are not concerned about the spread of false information, but the publication of the truth—which they have been working overtime to conceal.

With infections spreading this month, the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee has issued several statements, which the WSWS has published and FCA workers have widely circulated on social media. These include the November 4 statement “Autoworkers

demand to know: How extensive is the outbreak at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant?” which demanded that management make all cases and their locations public and that workers be allowed to quarantine easily and without harassment, with full pay and no loss of sick leave. This was the first statement anywhere which exposed the outbreak which is now in full swing in the plant.

On November 10, the committee issued a detailed exposure titled “Coronavirus spreading out of control at Sterling Stamping Plant: A case study of infections in the US auto industry.” The article reported a 189 percent increase in cases since the start of October and included a map of every department where the 26 reported cases had occurred.

This was followed by “Workers must stop production to contain coronavirus outbreak at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant!” on November 14, which reported the death of Bianchi and the fact that the UAW had pulled virtually all of its shop stewards from the shop floor.

Meanwhile, as the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee was calling for action by workers to halt the spread of the pandemic, UAW Local 1700 President Louie Pahl responded to growing demands for action by sending a threatening letter to workers, warning them not to post anything on social media about conditions in the plant. This underscores the hypocrisy of his claims in the podcast that the union is “not trying to silence anyone” and that it supports “freedom of speech.”

While ruling out a strike, Pahl called on workers to look to Michigan’s Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer to take actions to protect workers. However, the three-week partial lockdown order announced by Whitmer on November 15 specifically excluded factories, even though her health officials acknowledged that manufacturing facilities were one of the largest sources of outbreaks in the state.

The day after, the WSWS posted an article with a number of interviews with SHAP workers. “I hope we stop production,” one said. “It’s terrible. There’s no safety. They are not notifying people if people are infected. It was only the walkouts by workers that helped us to close the industry. The union is not helping us, not keeping us safe.”

Another said, “The plants should be shut down. We’re around our coworkers in the plant for a longer time than we are with our

families. Right now, its boiling over at SHAP and also the Sterling Stamping plant. I don't want to bring this disease home to my children or my parents."

On November 18, the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee posted the statement "End the coverup of the outbreak at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant! Stop nonessential production with full pay for workers to contain the pandemic!" The statement called for the "unity of SHAP workers with workers in other plants and industries to prepare collective action to shut down all non-essential production and guarantee full pay and benefits for all workers."

The company, the committee insisted, should be forced to pay for this from the massive profits it had accumulated, including \$1.4 billion in the third quarter alone, which it acquired by imposing 12-hour workdays, brutally exploiting temporary workers and keeping the factories open during a deadly pandemic.

In the podcast, Pahl was particularly outraged that the WSWs had reported the death of Mark Bianchi, complaining that he was getting calls from the *Wall Street Journal* and other national news publications. The union officials cynically claimed to be concerned about protecting the privacy of grieving family members, when the fact is that Bianchi's death would never have come to light unless relatives released the information that had been concealed by management and the UAW.

The Local 1700 officials acknowledged that demands are growing for a shutdown of production until the virus is contained. "We have gotten inquiries, 'why are you guys not walking us out?'" Pahl said.

He then stated, "The local can't just say 'this is a legitimate walkout, we are walking you out because of a,b,c,d,' we have to be given permission, we would have to submit that to the International and the IEB to make a decision. Anything other than that would be a wildcat, and we would never subject our members to... the repercussions from those actions."

Who is he kidding? Workers know full well that if they wait for sanction from the International UAW, there will never be a shutdown. The UAW is violently hostile to anything that impinges, no matter how slightly, on the profits of the auto companies. It was only because rank-and-file workers took independent action in opposition to the UAW that a temporary shutdown of auto production was enforced last March as the pandemic spread, undoubtedly saving thousands of lives. The walkout at SHAP, it should be recalled, took place only hours after the UAW dropped its empty bluster threatening a strike and announced a deal to keep the plants open during the pandemic.

After months of stonewalling on hard figures, the two Local 1700 officials claimed there had been just 72 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the plant since March and that a total of 463 workers have been quarantined. They announced the local would now, eight months into the pandemic—and after the deaths of at least five SHAP workers—start regular reporting of infections for the first time.

Full transparency on infections has been a longstanding demand by plant workers who have faced a complete news blackout by the UAW and management, making it impossible for workers to adequately protect themselves. Worse, workers who speak out

about cases in the plant face the threat of immediate termination.

However, even the minimal measures announced by Local 1700 should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Pahl and Oliver admitted said they would entirely rely on management for the infection numbers, without any independent monitoring or cross-checking. Given the long record of lies and coverup by the UAW and FCA, workers can place absolutely no confidence in these figures.

The two union officials denounce the WSWs as "anti-union." But the reality is that the UAW is anti-worker. It long ago abandoned any of the functions traditionally associated with unions. It does not unite workers, it divides them between tiers, between full-time and part-time, among plants and among countries.

Far from defending workers' jobs and living standards, the UAW officials took millions in bribes from FCA to cut the wages of new hires in half, abandon the eight-hour day, and accept other concessions. Above all, how can an organization which deliberately conspires with corporate management to keep workers on the job in a deadly pandemic be called a workers' organization?

That is why the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* is assisting workers in establishing a network of independent rank-and-file safety committees in the factories to provide genuine workplace representation. In contrast to the UAW, these committees are democratic organizations of struggle, answerable to the workers, not the auto companies, and demand that workers' health and safety come first, not production and profits.

We urge autoworkers at SHAP and other factories to help expand the network of rank-and-file safety committees and fight for the immediate shutdown of nonessential production until the pandemic is contained. The operative principle must be that workers' lives must take precedence over the profit drives of Wall Street and corporate management.



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