

UAW keeping workers at Ohio Ventra parts plant on the job without contract during pandemic

Zac Thorton
2 December 2020

To learn more about forming a rank-and-file safety committee at your plant, contact autoworkers@wsws.org.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) has kept auto parts workers at a plant in northern Ohio on the job for five months without a contract during the pandemic. Autoworkers at the Sandusky, Ohio plant operated by Flex-N-Gate subsidiary Ventra overwhelmingly voted down a sellout deal two months ago, brought forward by the union, which contained cuts to starting wages and extended the period for new hires to reach full pay. Since the rejection, the union has kept workers completely in the dark about the status of negotiations.

Ventra, which produces headlamps for Ford, employs 2,200 workers at its 1.2 million square foot Ohio facility. Contract negotiations with the company are being led by UAW Region 2B Director Wayne Blanchard, along with UAW Local 1216 officials.

Even without a contract, the UAW is keeping workers on the job in the midst of a major COVID-19 outbreak inside the plant. Dozens of autoworkers have been confirmed infected, most within the past few weeks. Meanwhile, workers have voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, by a 98 to 2 margin.

Since the reopening of the auto industry in May, the UAW has worked with management to keep workers on the job and prevent a repeat of the wildcat strike wave which shut down the industry in March. At many key plants, the union has only recently been releasing any figures on the spread of the disease. However, a leak from Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant demonstrated that the union has been given detailed statistics on infections and deaths from the beginning by management.

Determined to take matters into their own hands, autoworkers at plants throughout the country are forming rank-and-file safety committees to break through the UAW information blackout and coordinate a joint struggle in defense of workers' lives, including a shutdown of all nonessential industry, with pay guaranteed by the billions in profits which the Detroit automakers made in the third quarter. This includes not only assembly workers at major plants like Fiat Chrysler's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant but parts workers at Faurecia's Gladstone and Saline plants.

The blackout on negotiations has prompted a number of workers to reach out to local media to denounce the union. Many more have taken to social media to do the same.

In comments to the *Sandusky Register*, one worker said, "We're not hearing anything from anyone. A lot of us are asking 'Where is [Local 1216 President] Brett Whyde?'" Whyde, the report states, has been silent "for months."

While staying silent on negotiations, on November 20 Whyde issued a finger-waving letter to workers decrying quality issues at the plant. "We currently have 17 [quality rejects] for the month of November ... we had 17 QR's in total for the entire month of October with a goal of single digits," Whyde stated in language which may as well have been ghost-written by management. "The other big offender for everyone's knowledge is that we have ... accumulated over \$140,000 in scrap on Monday alone, which more than doubled our target."

After chewing out workers for their poor performance, Whyde noted casually that the plant had seen 11 infections over the previous week, with 46

workers in quarantine. In a letter the following Wednesday he admitted to seven infections and 56 workers in quarantine.

The November 20 letter, which was posted on the union's Facebook page, prompted an outpouring of anger from workers. One worker wrote:

“WHAT’S GOING ON WITH THE CONTRACT? THAT’S WHAT WE WANNA KNOW! Are we getting our little \$300 (\$500 taxed) ‘bonus’? Are you all even meeting with them? Or just hanging out up there? Meanwhile your plant and members who voted for you guys are getting sh---ed on daily by management! This is just unbelievable!”

On November 22 the union's Facebook published the November 20 letter from UAW President Rory Gamble announcing the suspension of “all local union meetings and events” until April 15, 2021. While workers are being forced to risk their lives in the factories, the UAW is taking measures to safeguard the health of the bureaucracy and shield it from the criticisms of its membership.

The response from workers has been scathing. “Still can’t have membership meetings, still can’t have a new contract, still can’t have a raise, still can’t get management to quit signing off on bad parts,” wrote one worker. “We can, however, have meetings in the plant on the floor where we are encouraged to stand close together so we can better hear management tell us we suck.”

The mounting anger from workers forced Whyde to issue a second letter on November 25. In it, he refused to take any responsibility for keeping workers in the dark or for continuing to allow contract negotiations or lack thereof to carry on indefinitely. Instead, he presented the union as completely subservient to the company, writing, “In regards to Collective Bargaining your bargaining team is and has been ready and able to participate when the Company provides their availability.”

Whyde also shot down any suggestion of a strike, claiming that any strike “has to be authorized by Detroit for legality reasons.” This is the same bogus excuse given to Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) workers in Detroit by UAW Local 1700 President Louie Pahl, who said workers “have to be given permission” from “the International and the IEB.” In the course of the same podcast where he made

these statements, Pahl threatened workers not to read the *World Socialist Web Site*.

As every autoworker knows, UAW President Rory Gamble and the coterie of gangsters in Solidarity House will never call a strike. Instead, they are doing everything possible to keep production going at full capacity to fuel massive profits for the automakers.

The workers at Ventra and all autoworkers must draw the necessary conclusions. The struggle to defend their livelihoods and their lives must not rest in the hands of the corrupt UAW. Instead, workers must form rank-and-file safety committees to appeal to autoworkers, teachers and other workers across the country for support and to organize a struggle to shut down the auto plants. To learn more about forming a rank-and-file safety committee at your plant, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact