

Federal judge hands UAW ex-President Dennis Williams wrist-slap sentence of 21 months for corruption charges

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On Tuesday, a federal judge for the Eastern District of Michigan sentenced former United Auto Workers International President Dennis Williams to 21 months in prison with one year of supervised release, three months less than originally recommended. In addition, he must pay \$132,000 in restitution and a \$10,000 fine. Williams is one of 15 individuals to have been charged in connection to the ongoing criminal investigation into corruption within the UAW.

US District Judge Paul Borman handed down the sentence after Williams' conviction of conspiracy to embezzle UAW members' dues payments between 2010 and September 2019 with former International President Gary Jones and other high-ranking UAW officials "for the benefit of himself and other senior UAW officials," according to the Justice Department's official release.

This amounts to a slap on the wrist when compared to the scope of his crimes. Williams' jail sentence will likely be carried out at a "Club Fed"-type facility like the one in which ex-UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell served until he was released early a year ago.

During his tenure as president, Williams and other top UAW officials including Jones and former UAW Region 5 Director Vance Pearson embezzled union funds for years to provide themselves with "multi-month long stays at private villas in Palm Springs, cigars, golfing apparel, green fees at golf courses, and high-end liquor and meals" and other personal items.

In one episode rich with irony, Williams had gold coins minted for the 2018 UAW Constitutional Convention to mark the end of his tenure as president, which he distributed to his fellow bureaucrats. The coins contained a picture of Williams himself and the phrase, "Life isn't complete unless you have made the lives of others better."

In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Williams continues to claim to have played no role in directing the embezzlement of funds, claiming instead that

he was only the willing beneficiary of the malfeasance of his fellow co-conspirators. "I cannot express my sorrow about this ending. I feel foolish and embarrassed taking Gary Jones at his word when he said everything at the conference was above board," Williams told the court, referring to his protégé and successor in office.

Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* expressed their outrage at the pitiful sentence doled out to Williams for his crimes.

"It's a joke, and just shows he paid his way out of this. The UAW probably helped him with his legal fees under the table. The whole system is corrupt, including the judicial system," said one Kentucky auto parts worker.

"I am so fed up with these unions selling out the people that pay their salary. We just had a contract negotiation at my plant. I think our own regional representative and our own president and negotiations team sold us out completely. Our contract is garbage. We had people on layoff, along with COVID-19 and sick leave, that didn't even have the opportunity to voice their concerns. First contract got voted down and two weeks later it was basically the same contract, but got voted in. The UAW gave all the power to the company."

A worker at Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant said, "Just goes to show everyone how messed up the system really is. Twenty-one months in jail and a \$10,000 fine is a SLAP in the face of every member of the UAW. [Williams] is and was no good for the members. He is just like the rest of the higher ups in the UAW that got away with criminal charges. Justice was not served by any one of those people who stole from the union members. Here is what the union does: make the lie big. Keep saying it. That is the UAW."

"Twenty-one months for stealing millions of dollars, stealing from all these locals? He's getting off light," one Volvo Truck worker in Virginia exclaimed, comparing Williams and the UAW officials to "crime bosses back in the day, like Al Capone." The UAW ended a two-week

strike and forced 3,000 workers at Volvo Truck back on the job after announcing a sellout agreement before workers had a chance to read or vote on it, an action which workers have vehemently denounced.

“I don’t understand why he doesn’t get more time, somebody has to pay for this crime,” the worker continued. “For what they did, they are getting off easy. You have retirees who can barely make it and these people just get [less than] two years?”

Williams was, and remains, a leading representative of the degenerate trade union bureaucracy, whose six-figure incomes are ultimately derived from their ability to suppress strikes and the class struggle and enforce concessions, layoffs and wage cuts on behalf of the major corporations.

Workers exercise no control whatsoever over this organization, which functions not as a union but as a cheap labor contractor. While the sentencing memorandum filed last week noted that Williams ran unopposed in every union “election” he participated in for three decades, it also described him as an “institution” unto himself in the upper echelons of the union. In other words, Williams derived his authority, not from the democratic will of autoworkers, but from his ability to control the flow of funds into the pockets of his fellow bureaucrats.

The UAW and President Rory Gamble claim that the union has now “cleaned house,” particularly in the aftermath of last year’s settlement with federal investigators to end the corruption probe. But Williams’ sentencing comes as the UAW is in the process of forcing through no less than four sellout contracts—at the aforementioned Volvo Truck, at auto parts supplier Nexteer, and among graduate students at Columbia University and New York University.

This is the outcome of the corporatist policies promoted for decades by both parties, but associated in particular with the Democrats, under which the unions have been transformed into instruments of class rule and imperialist statecraft. It is noteworthy that almost all of the crimes alleged in all of the indictments from the federal probe stem from the period after the 2009 bailout of the auto industry by the Obama administration, in which Biden served as vice president.

As part of the bailout, Obama/Biden funneled tens of billions of dollars in corporate stock into the UAW—that is, legal bribes—in exchange for its support for the transformation of the auto industry into a low-wage sector. The UAW even briefly became the majority shareholder in Chrysler.

If Biden now boasts that he will be the most “pro-union” president in American history, it means that he intends to use the unions in the same way that he did in 2009, as a means of imposing pro-corporate discipline on the working class.

What was uncovered in the years-long corruption probe was no doubt only the tip of the iceberg. But while Williams et al. engorged themselves on millions in embezzled dues money and corporate bribes, the union has received *billions* in direct infusions of corporate cash, in the form of joint training programs, labor management committees, spots on corporate boards, ownership of stock and investment funds and countless other schemes. According to the sentencing memorandum, Chrysler alone handed the UAW \$300 million between 2003 and 2019 through the company-union National Training Center. However, no one has been charged for these far larger transfers of money because they have received the legal sanction of the capitalist state.

The Williams sentencing also exposes those, such as the Democratic Socialists of America and *Labor Notes*, who lionize the criminal syndicates masquerading as unions as “workers organizations.” For four years, *Jacobin* magazine, the de facto mouthpiece of the DSA, studiously ignored the corruption scandal, even as hundreds of thousands of autoworkers seethed with anger over the revelations.

A search on *Jacobin*’s website returns only a *single* result for “Dennis Williams,” an article from January which claims that the “door has been opened to a more democratic UAW” under the aegis of the federal consent decree. In reality, these organizations are led in no small part by union functionaries and aspiring functionaries who smell opportunities for their own personal advancement.

The way forward is the development of a rebellion against this outlived organization, through the development of rank-and-file committees to establish workers’ own independent initiative. In opposition to the paid corporate functionaries of the union, rank-and-file committees are composed of and democratically led by workers themselves.

Over the past year, a network of such committees has been established at auto plants, school districts and warehouses throughout the world. The next step is to develop this network into a cohesive international movement, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, an initiative launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* at its annual May Day rally earlier this month.

To join a committee, or for help forming one at your workplace, contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



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