

US auto companies complain of “labor shortage” as temporary workers denied profit sharing

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Detroit-based automakers continue to find it difficult to hire and retain enough temporary workers to maintain full production during the ongoing pandemic, given the deplorable wages, benefits and working conditions that temporary part-time autoworkers must endure. To add insult to injury, these workers are denied thousands of dollars in so-called profit-sharing payments which full-time workers receive.

Since the start of the pandemic, thousands of autoworkers have been sickened and hundreds have perished from COVID-19, although neither the auto companies or the United Auto Workers have released the full numbers to the public. Absenteeism has also soared as workers have taken sick leave or simply stayed home to prevent getting themselves and their family infected. To keep the factories running, all the major auto companies and parts suppliers have hired large numbers of temporary part-time and other contingent workers.

Starting pay for temporary part-time or “supplemental” workers at Detroit area auto plants is just \$15.78 per hour, the rate now paid by many fast-food restaurants. Despite working 40 hours or more a week, supplementals are not eligible for profit-sharing checks, saving the company countless millions of dollars. Stellantis recently issued checks of up to \$14,670 to full-time employees. General Motors and Ford handed out \$10,250 and \$7,377 respectively.

The term “temporary part-time” is totally deceptive. These workers can be forced to work 12-hour shifts and 40 hours or more a week, including weekends and holidays. They can be employed for years with no guarantee of ever becoming full time. They can be shifted from plant to plant as needed. While paying union dues, they have virtually no protections under the United Auto Workers labor agreement and can be fired for minor infractions with no right to file a grievance.

Conditions at the Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly Plant located just outside Detroit highlight the abusive conditions supplemental workers face. As one supplemental worker at Warren Truck wrote to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, “I never imagined that a McDonald’s worker or an Amazon worker would be offered better incentives than an employee of the world’s third-largest automaker.”

The treatment of supplemental workers has evoked outrage from full-time workers, who understand that the abuse of temp workers threatens all workers. A recent letter distributed by rank-and-file workers at the Warren Truck break room stated, “Profit Sharing checks will go out March 11 to some employees. The untold story is of the thousands of Supplemental employees who won’t receive a dime. No matter how many hours they worked last year, (many averaged over 40 hours a week) they get nothing.”

A supplemental worker at Warren Truck told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “There are many supplemental employees who should have been converted to full time and entitled to those checks,” based on their hire dates. He said Stellantis and the UAW used “a pick and choose” conversion process over the last two years in which supplemental employees who had less time on the job were converted ahead of workers with longer service.

He continued, “They’re trying to bring in a lot more new people. The last batch was so young, I think they’re getting them straight out of high school. I’ve trained a few of the new hires. They don’t even get a week of training. They get a day and they’re on their own. Learning what they can on the shop floor.

“If they brought in a hundred, they might be in good shape. But they may at most get 50 or 60. But they come in like 12 or 13 at a time. Last week we got a few and the week before we got a few more. It’s slow here now. But a lot of them don’t last. Once they get here, they hear stories that ‘we’re not being hired.’ [full time] So many don’t last long.”

On March 3, the UAW announced that it had agreed with management to drop masking requirements at plants not deemed “high risk” under the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s emasculated standards. Another Warren Truck worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “We got [COVID] infections in the plant now. Yesterday there was a worker who had a 103-degree fever in here. They’re getting rid of masks, but I am going to wear mine.” A coworker added, “All they care about is keeping the factories going and making money. They figure if one of us dies, they’ll just replace us and keep

the line moving.”

According to a recent report in the *Detroit Free Press* the labor shortage is so serious that the Michigan Manufacturers Association has brought in a new director of workforce development focused on aggressively promoting recruitment of autoworkers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics the number of automotive sector jobs declined in January by 3,500 and another 18,000 in February despite aggressive attempts at hiring by auto and auto parts companies.

The *Free Press* report cites a UAW official at the General Motors Bowling Green, Kentucky, assembly plant who reports, “It has become common for GM to hire 10 temps and only six to eight show up for their first day on the job.”

Under conditions where many fast food and retail chains are paying wages of \$15 an hour and more, the grueling work in auto plants, where thousands of workers often work in close proximity with COVID-19 still rampant, is a hard sell.

A worker in the Detroit area who recently went through the job interview process with Stellantis spoke to the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “They have established that you are not going to have a life. You are on call with a starting wage of \$15.78 and may require overtime Saturday and holidays.

“My greatest fear was getting fired. They have the right to fire you out of the blue.

“I have a disability and a conviction. I was honest on my application, but they never asked me about it. They were supposed to give me a physical as part of the hiring process; but never gave one. I take a lot of expensive medicines and they may not like paying for that.

“We are in a pandemic, and you have to work in close proximity. Every week there are fewer and fewer people wearing masks. What happens if you are a supplemental and you get sick? Are you going to be able to keep your job? What happens if you get Long COVID?

“At the orientation session it was full. I was in an auditorium, and they had 300 people easy. On the job description it says you must work different shifts, work weekends and holidays, work in hot and cold environments, work safely around heavy equipment, stand or walk long periods of time each day, frequently bend or stoop, reach and lift up to 40 pounds and work in tight closed spaces... They are asking for a lot and not paying you.

“There are three shifts, but they don’t tell you what shift. They want workers, but they won’t answer basic questions. Their attitude is ‘just be thankful for the job,’” he said.

In addition, he said, “You have to pay \$50 in union initiation dues off the top. I am supposed to pay them, but the union is not guaranteeing they have my back. They just want money; that’s gangsterism.”

Primary responsibility for these conditions rests with the UAW. In a series of concessionary contracts, the bribed officials of the UAW, many now sitting in prison, agreed to the spread of low-paid labor, including multiple wage tiers and the

virtually unlimited employment of temporary workers.

The UAW and the Democratic administration of Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan have collaborated to tap impoverished inner-city areas as a source of low-paid labor through such measures as the Detroit Works program and Community Benefits Ordinance.

At his annual State of the City speech earlier this month Duggan spoke of the shortage of qualified workers in Detroit, citing “13,000 vacant jobs.” The situation is so acute the city is even paying young people who failed to graduate from high school \$10 an hour to attend literacy classes so they can pass their high school equivalency test (GED) and is offering free paid community college and four-year college tuition to all Detroit residents.

Duggan’s speech, given at “Factory Zero,” the newly retooled General Motors electric vehicle plant in Detroit, hyped the supposed comeback of Detroit under his administration. However, the corporate money invested in the city has primarily focused on the redevelopment of certain high-profile sites downtown, while a mere pittance has been spent on public transport, affordable housing and schools. Corporations like Stellantis, Lear, Flex-N-Gate and other auto parts makers have been enticed to build new factories in the city through the offer of cheap land, tax breaks and ready access to a supply of low-paid labor.

While the 2019 UAW national contract supposedly addressed the issue of the abuse of temporary workers by providing a “pathway” to full-time positions, the pandemic has been used to toss this out the window. This underscores the role played by the UAW as a corrupt extension of corporate management. The demand must be raised for the immediate full-time hiring of all temp workers, the abolition of tiers and the payment of all profit-sharing and bonuses given to full time workers.

To fight for this, workers need new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the UAW, and committed to defend the interests of the working class, not the corporate owners. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Stellantis Warren Truck Plant workers and all other autoworkers to join and build these committees today—sign up below to speak with someone at the WSWS about a committee at your workplace:



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact