

# Ventra Evart worker describes sweatshop conditions, UAW collusion with management

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Workers at Ventra's auto parts plant in Evart, Michigan are pressing for strike action after overwhelmingly defeating a pro-company contract last week by a vote of 683-40. The 94.5 percent "no" vote was a rebuke to the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, which backed the agreement that included a below-inflation rate raise and higher medical expenses for workers barely surviving on wages of \$16 to \$17 an hour.

Since the vote, UAW Local 2270 officials have largely stonewalled the workers. Instead of calling a strike, the local union immediately issued a letter extending the contract past the July 1 expiration date and resumed backroom negotiations with Ventra. The last thing UAW President Ray Curry and the International and local union officials want is a strike at a key components plant, which could quickly lead to the shutdown of plants at Ford, GM and Stellantis (Chrysler).

Well aware of the growing support for a walkout, however, union officials have said they would hold a membership meeting and non-binding strike vote on Sunday. "Due to this being a special meeting," Local 2270 officials said in a statement released Tuesday, "only questions pertaining to the strike vote will be allowed."

Workers have also told the *World Socialist Web Site* that management is spreading "rumors" that production will be shifted to Ventra's Sandusky, Ohio plant in the event of a strike. The UAW has done nothing to counter these threats even though Sandusky workers are also UAW members. The reason is clear: They fear any collaboration between Evart and Sandusky workers. In 2020, the 2,200 workers at the Sandusky plant shot down a UAW-backed contract after plastering the plant with "Vote No" and "Stop UAW corruption" signs.

Workers spoke to the WSWs about the UAW's collusion with management and abysmal conditions in the factory that they allow. "Work conditions suck," a veteran worker exclaimed. "We run nonstop with no breaks most days since the line has to continue running. I know we're there for work but to do it nonstop with no breaks is horrible! I can't remember the break times since we don't take them!"

Referring to the contract extension, he said, "The current contract is a joke and the one they [UAW] brought was a joke too. Reps say if you don't like it to go find another job. They're in the company's pockets. Most people in there feel there is no good having the union. We're sheep to them. One guy left because he had a baby and was fired. The union didn't defend him. Here you'll be protected by who you know. They treat all other employees like crap. With the pay they

are giving us, I'd rather go to McDonald's; it's the same pay. What the company wants is more production, they don't care about quality or people.

"We were surprised to not be mandated this weekend. Usually, we have overtime even on holidays, working 12-hour shifts. Everyone in here has a family. This is the first time in weeks I am with family. We work most times seven days a week, 10-12 hours a day. Many people quit or collapse. If you work second and third shift, you sleep days and work nights. I worked that and almost had a divorce because of the hours. You never see your family. I'm not excited about going back to work this week. I go to the doctor for my anxiety because of that place. My wife even said I'm happier when I have time off. You shouldn't have to dread going in to work. I can't even enjoy what I do!

"[UAW regional representative] Dan Kosheba makes over 130 grand, but we have to live paycheck-to-paycheck. He wouldn't dare to show his face in the town. Everyone knows the union is corrupt. They split seniority and less experienced workers. Some get breaks and the others are told to keep their mouth shut. I have to eat my lunch while working on the line."

Opposing the backroom deals with the company, he continued: "Why are they so secret about the negotiations? Adam Spayth, our union rep, was at his house, with management's HR rep. Why would you meet in private in your home? I know why: It's the same reason why they're never at work." Instead of secret talks, he said, "Everyone should hear the negotiations."

"Inflation is making everything go up except pay. I live close to Ventra and had times where I almost didn't make it to work because of the gas prices. Most people can't afford to have a house. Now both parents work and barely scrape by. In Evart, this plant used to have highest-paying jobs. Now Ventra makes billions and doesn't pay its workers. We'll probably get offered chump change for next [tentative agreement]. I see a strike coming, it needs to happen."

**"They don't want it safe for people. That's how it feels to be a worker."**

"When COVID started we were deemed 'essential.' We were supposed to receive hazard pay but our pay stayed at the normal rate. Two of my friends almost died. Ventra made them come back to work. I know they got it in the plant. Now, they still can't breathe. They are scarred for the rest of their lives.

"I could tell you about the death toll at Ventra. A few years ago, Robin [Wilkins-Yazdani] died from a pipe dropping on her head. Recently someone had their legs crushed between two dies. The crane he was working with was a two-man job but he was alone that day. Another person who saw it happen saved his life. It was known that the brake mechanism to catch the crane was faulty. There are jobs like this all over the plant where one person does it. You'll see a red tag on a machine that is leaking and [management] takes the tag off. They don't fix machines. There was a hydraulic press that exploded and sprayed hot oil on workers. They don't want it safe for people. That's how it feels to be a worker. I'm sick of people getting injured and dying. A lot have left this job because it's unsafe. I am only going back because of my job and my brothers and sisters.

"I heard about the worker from the [Stellantis] Sterling Stamping plant who was crushed to death by a die falling on him. It's horrible to lose a worker. They ignore the risk and that's why people die. It's never an 'accident.' There's no such thing. Workers can only be so safe; it's the company's responsibility to fix things and provide simple precautions. It's a sweatshop here with a 100-degree temperature. We get yelled at when we try to take a small break."

### **UAW's history of betrayal at Ventra**

The UAW forced workers at the Ventra Sandusky plant to work without a new contract for months in 2020. During negotiations, the UAW kept workers on the job despite major outbreaks of COVID infections. In September, the UAW Local 1216 was forced to withdraw a sellout agreement after workers rejected it by a 78-22 percent vote.

The deal would have rolled back new-hire starting wages from \$15.30 to \$15. New hires would work three years to reach Level 1 pay while the previous contract would take at least two. The signing bonus was reduced from \$1,700 down to \$1,500. Full-time workers would receive 30 cents a year for three years and 65 cents in the final year of the contract, with no raise at all until March 2021.

Workers rebelled against the UAW bureaucracy, taking to Facebook challenging the sellout deal. "Why do we have to wait 6 months for a raise of 30 cents??? And no back pay. They might get some people to wait for 95 cents, but waiting 6 months for 30 cents is BS without back pay." Another worker said, "So, incentives are gone, bonus went down, what else did we lose? Still 8 1/2 hour shifts, vacation the same just shuffled? No for me."

Workers cast a 98 percent vote to authorize a strike. From May 2020 to December, however, the UAW stalled, keeping workers in the dark about ongoing talks. At the same time, after wildcat strikes over the spread of COVID forced the two-month shutdown of the auto industry, the UAW herded workers back into the plants despite the continued threats.

Instead of calling strike action, UAW Local 1216 President Brett Whyde denounced workers for quality issues. Sounding like a supervisor, he blamed workers for \$140,000 worth of scrap for one day. Workers took to social media: "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!"

Despite demands for strike action, the UAW blocked any struggle, wore workers down and eventually imposed another sellout deal.

### **Need to build rank-and-file committees**

Workers in Evart cannot allow this to happen. Importantly, they have formed the Ventra Workers Rank-and-File Committee to oppose the sabotage of the UAW bureaucracy and fight for the demands they need. This includes demanding the removal of the current bargaining committee and its replacement with a committee elected from the shop floor.

Will Lehman, who is running for president of the UAW to abolish the union bureaucracy and empower the rank and file, issued a statement in support of the Ventra workers, along with the GM Subsystems workers whose strike was blocked by the UAW with a last-minute deal last week. "The Ventra workers have taken the courageous step of building their own rank-and-file controlled committee to continue their fight," Lehman said. "I urge all Ventra, Flex N Gate and other parts workers to join and expand this committee and fight for a massive wage increase, COLA to meet soaring inflation, and enough time off to spend with their families."

Responding to Lehman's announcement of his candidacy, one Ventra worker stated, "He is spot on with everything he said. I'd vote yes for him. Even though he's been in for five years, he knows what he sees and has to try to survive."

Another worker added, "I saw part of it, he's just like us! There are strikes everywhere, rail workers, pilots, nurses. They're on the front line just like us but making chump change." When asked about Lehman's call for unity with the growing movement of workers internationally, he said, "I agree with that! I'm in."

The near-unanimous rejection of the contract was a genuine act of solidarity. But the UAW officials have no intention to bring anything better back, let alone call a strike. To oppose this, workers must expand the Ventra Rank-and-File Committee and link with GM Subsystems workers and their brothers and sisters at the Big Three automakers to prepare a common fight to fight for inflation-busting wages, end all tiers and contract work and to reestablish parity pay between parts and assembly workers.



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