

Stellantis workers strike Kokomo Casting Plant over health and safety

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Workers at the Stellantis casting plant in Kokomo, Indiana, struck Saturday morning over contract issues. According to a brief announcement posted on the United Auto Workers main website, UAW Local 1166 is calling for “management to repair, replace and maintain the HVAC systems (something the company promised to do years ago), address other health and safety issues, provide clean uniforms like it does for workers at other plants, and fix some work rules.”

The 1,000 hourly workers at the Kokomo Casting Plant (KCP) produce parts for transmissions and other critical components for Stellantis vehicles. A prolonged strike at the plant, according to Stellantis the “largest die cast facility in the world,” would impact Stellantis operations in the US and internationally within days.

The UAW, however, has no intention of conducting such a struggle and plans to end the strike as soon as possible. The walkout is being carefully stage-managed by both the UAW International and local to dissipate mounting anger over intolerable working conditions in Kokomo and other plants.

Widely despised by workers, the UAW International is pointing to the strike as proof of its willingness to stand up for workers. “UAW members have made Stellantis their profits, yet the company is indifferent to the working conditions that Local 1166 members must endure.” Local 1166 is also the home local of Shawn Fain, a longtime UAW International rep who is being presented as the official “opposition” to UAW President Ray Curry.

In fact, Curry and Fain are just as indifferent to the conditions of rank-and-file autoworkers, having negotiated years of concessionary contracts, which abolished the eight-hour day, cut wages for new hires in half and sanctioned the horrific exploitation of temporary workers.

By calling the strike this weekend, when no production was scheduled, the UAW has ensured there will be no immediate impact to Stellantis operations. At the same time, the UAW has told other Kokomo-area Stellantis workers **not to support** the Kokomo Casting workers by joining their picket lines. Union officials at the much larger UAW Local 685 claim their nearly 7,000 members could not join the picket line because they work for the same company!

UAW officials have also called on Kokomo Casting workers to not hinder in any way the operation of the plant, including by blocking the entrance of contractors.

As in every other plant, there are plenty of reasons for casting workers to strike. Facebook posts by Kokomo-area Stellantis workers note the terrible conditions at Kokomo Casting, in particular, the abuse of temp workers. At the same time, workers expressed deep distrust of Curry, Fain and other UAW leaders.

One worker wrote, “I worked as a TPT (temporary part-time) for 10 years and always paid dues never got nothing for it, I didn’t even get the bonus or nothing that the full time employee got.

“Anyway I got cancer and had to quit and while I was going thru my chemo and stuff they tried to hire me full time and I couldn’t take it cause I was sick. This was back in 2011. So it hasn’t changed. If I would have been full time or had some of the perks I might still have my job.”

Another posted, “Some people go through absolute hell to keep that job up standing on your feet 10 to 12 hours a day forced to work at midnights forced to work Saturdays. That environment can create a slew of health problems & God only knows the carcinogenic material that is getting stuck to their clothes and that they’re inhaling that could cause cancer down the line.”

In 2018, a worker was horribly injured at KCP after a

die fell on top of him. In previous years the plant had been subjected to numerous citations by state of Indiana safety officials over unsafe conditions at the plant. However, the UAW stonewalled releasing any information on the circumstances surrounding the injury of the worker, Eric Parsons, and took no measures to demand improved safety at the plant.

One worker at KCP wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* at the time, “Working on the dies in the machines at [the] casting plant there are lock out procedures you have to follow for your safety. Also in moving dies there are safety rules to follow. If any of these are changed it could or will kill you. I have seen two operators killed in machines while I worked there.”

In 2018, workers at the nearby Stellantis Kokomo transmission plants voted overwhelmingly for strike authorization over an estimated 200 unresolved grievances, including for health and safety issues and the abuse of temporary workers, but the vote was ignored by UAW International and Local 685 officials.

Will Lehman, the Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, said, “I fully support the Kokomo Casting workers and the fight for every worker to a safe workplace. But workers have learned from experience that the UAW will never lead a serious struggle against the corporations.

“This is shown by the fact that the strike is being conducted on a weekend when no production is scheduled. UAW officials have instructed thousands of members in nearly all Stellantis plants not to show up at the picket line.

“The UAW apparatus knows pressure is building, and it needs to carry out an occasional act of opposition to let the steam out. In the past, the UAW called one- or two-day ‘Hollywood strikes,’ which had no impact on the companies.

“When workers force the UAW to call strikes, the union officials don’t set out to win them, but to wear workers down. More than four months ago, 1,000 CNH workers in Wisconsin and Iowa went on strike to win substantial raises and cost-of-living protection and the ending of tiers. The UAW has isolated their strike, imposed a news blackout and is forcing CNH workers and their families to survive on \$400 a week in strike pay.

“The purpose of a strike is to exert pain on the

companies. For that, we have to unite all workers—teachers, railroad workers, nurses, everyone—together. Workers everywhere are willing to fight. But we need organization and direction. That is why my campaign supports the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).”

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter encourages Kokomo Stellantis workers to register for a live discussion this Sunday at 2:00 p.m. Eastern Time with Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker running for UAW president, who will address these questions. Lehman has placed at the center of his campaign the need for autoworkers to organize rank-and-file committees independent of the UAW bureaucracy to oversee workplace conditions.

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter encourages Stellantis Kokomo area workers to contact us with information on conditions at your plant.



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