

Stellantis Kokomo workers discuss fight for rank-and-file control of contract fight

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Stellantis workers in Kokomo, Indiana expressed their determination to strike in September to win back cost-of-living (COLA) protections, pensions and equal pay for all workers, in discussions this week with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Kokomo, 65 miles north of Indianapolis, is a major manufacturing center for Stellantis. Nearly 8,000 workers are employed at five major facilities, including the Kokomo transmission, casting and engine factories, the Indiana Transmission Plant, and a smaller transmission plant in nearby Tipton.

After decades of factory closures and mass layoffs, including at the former General Motors plant in town, workers in the city face a new attack as the automakers convert to electric vehicle production. A brand new Stellantis-Samsung plant is being built on the outskirts of town, where the company intends to hire low-wage workers.

Kokomo is also the hometown of United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain. He began as a UAW Local 1166 skilled trades rep and shop chairman at Kokomo Casting Plant and worked his way up onto the UAW-Chrysler Negotiating Committee in 2009, where he endorsed the savage cuts by the Obama Auto Task Force, including the elimination of COLA and the extension of the hated two-tier wage and benefit system to all new hires. After spending more than a decade as a UAW International representative, Fain was installed as union president earlier this year after a rigged election that excluded 90 percent of the membership.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, a team of WSWS reporters spoke to workers at the Kokomo Casting and Kokomo Transmission plants, and distributed hundreds of copies of the statement, "What autoworkers need to win the 2023 Big Three contract battle," by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network.

"In my 29 years here, I've never seen workers more willing to strike," a casting worker told the WSWS. "We need pensions and COLA back, and no more of this tiers crap. Starting pay and top pay have to be raised." The worker said he knew Fain for more than two decades, and he was skeptical that he would lead the type of fight necessary to break the resistance of the auto companies to workers' demands. "He might call a strike just to make a name for himself."

Another casting worker was blunter, pointing to the fact that Fain worked in the UAW-Chrysler Department under former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who has convicted for taking bribes from company executives for pushing through the 2015 concessions contract. "You don't get up to the UAW International without hobnobbing with management. The people who brought him into the International were some of the most corrupt in union history. You can't believe he wasn't a part of it too."

Campaigners explained that the conduct of the contract struggle had to be taken out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy and transferred to the workers on the shop floor, through the expansion of the network of rank-and-file committees.

"I agree with you, workers have to have more power," a worker with 10 years at the Kokomo Transmission plant said. "We're fighting to get back what the UAW gave up years ago, like COLA and pensions. It's unacceptable, in 2023, that we have fight for what we used to have instead of fighting for more."

"The UAW keeps us in the dark and we don't get any real information. This time, we can't accept just getting 'highlights' of the contracts. There is always so much between the lines they don't tell you. After they stick you with it, they tell you, 'You should have read the whole contract.'

"We've got a real battle on our hands. We have to strike, and it can't be a two-day or even a two-week strike. We have to hit them where it hurts, in their pockets. Workers are getting ready for a long strike."

“When I was growing up, everybody was buying Chryslers. Now, we can’t afford to buy the cars we build. My granddad worked at the GM Marion plant, and he raised a family of nine on a single income. I’ve got a family of five and I’m struggling to raise my kids on my paycheck.”

“Now, the UAW is saying if we get a second job during a strike making \$500 or more a week, we won’t get strike pay. That’s our money. I pay union dues every month, and I’ve worked 10 hard years. They don’t care about the rank and file, just themselves.”

Another casting worker said, “We need more time off; we can’t even use our PAA days when we want to,” referring to the Paid Absence Allowance days workers accumulate. “I’ve got almost 10 years here, and all I have is two weeks’ vacation. In the nonunion factories, workers are getting 3-4 weeks and higher pay just to hire in. That’s because the higher-ups in the unions are getting paid extra off of our dues money.”

Discussing the company’s plans to operate a joint venture with Samsung, a young casting worker said: “My friend was really looking forward to getting a job at the new battery plant. But they are not going to be part of the national contract. You got the first and second tiers in the plant already, now you’re going to have a third and fourth in the electric vehicle factories.”

Workers said the UAW was oblivious to their concerns about exhausting schedules and unsafe conditions in the plant, and expressed agreement with the building of rank-and-file committees that would oversee line speeds and enforce health and safety.

“All the union stewards ever say is ‘There is nothing we can do’ or ‘We’ll get back to you.’ Workers constantly write tickets about safety issues, like oil and lube on the floor, but nothing gets done. There are machines in there that workers have complained about for years, and they still don’t fix them.”

“When you go to the union steward and say management is violating a contract, they always say, ‘That’s a gray area—they can do that,’” another casting worker said. “It makes no sense. Why do we have a contract if it is filled with a bunch of ‘gray areas’?”

In September 2022, the UAW International sanctioned a three-day “Hollywood strike” at the casting plant over health and safety violations, which was shut down before it affected the company’s operations and led to nothing but worthless promises from the company to improve conditions.

“Heat is a real problem inside the factory and has been for years. The company keeps saying they’re going to install air conditioners, but they never do,” another worker told the WSWS. “Management worked out a gentleman’s agreement

to keep us from passing out on the lines on hot summer days where we would get longer breaks—30 minutes. But they went back on that so we’re back to 12-, 18-minute breaks, which for a lot of people means walking to the break room and then having to turn right around and walk back to the line. And they only have one person relieving six or seven people, so you’re waiting forever—it’s not healthy.”

Campaigners explained that the Biden administration’s Department of Labor had sanctioned the bogus UAW election, even though Fain was put in power with only 3 percent of the votes of actual rank-and-file workers.

“I got some stuff in the mail about the UAW election, but a lot of workers didn’t even know it was happening. I read [Mack Trucks workers and socialist candidate for UAW president] Will Lehman’s concerns that UAW members were denied the right to vote. I agree with that and believe the election should be rerun with everyone informed.”

Regarding the intervention of Biden into the contract talks, he said, “I don’t support the Democrats or the Republicans. They all put money over the people.” He expressed his concern over Biden’s escalating military conflict with Russia and China and the danger of nuclear war, saying, “That doesn’t sound good for my five-year-old daughter.” He added, “The people are the ones who always pay for war.”

Asked what he thought about the growing strike wave around the world, he said: “It’s good that the actors went on strike, and we all have to stand together because that is the only way we can accomplish anything. This is worldwide, I watched on YouTube how the workers in Mexico marched up to the border with the United States and asked American workers to join them on strike. The media never covers this.”

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