

International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees holds emergency online meeting to organize fight against mass job cuts

Our reporters
23 January 2024

Opposition among rank-and-file workers is growing against the ongoing destruction of auto industry jobs in the US and internationally. This found its most significant and conscious expression on Saturday, when workers affected by job cuts at Stellantis, General Motors and Ford met with workers in other industries in an online meeting sponsored by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss the fight to stop the destruction of jobs.

On January 12, Stellantis fired 539 temporary workers—called supplemental employees (SEs)—in Metro Detroit and Kokomo, Indiana. United Auto Workers officials admit another 1,600 temps will be terminated in the coming weeks. This is on top of the previously announced 3,700 layoffs that Stellantis will carry out in Detroit and Toledo, Ohio, in early February.

On January 19, Ford announced it is slashing production at the Rouge Electric Vehicle Center (REVC) in Dearborn, Michigan, to one shift by April, cutting 1,400 jobs. Some 700 workers are supposed to be transferred to the Michigan Assembly Plant and other factories, leaving another 700 facing indefinite layoffs or forced retirements.

In addition, GM has announced 1,300 cuts at its Orion and Lansing Grand River assembly plants and has laid off another 900 workers at GM Cruise, equivalent to 25 percent of the workforce at its automated taxi subsidiary.

These are part of a global jobs massacre, including 2,250 layoffs by Stellantis in northern Italy, the closure of Ford's Saarlouis plant in Germany and tens of thousands of other job cuts by VW, Bosch, Continental, Skoda and other companies in Europe.

"To understand how to fight these job cuts, it is necessary to see them as part of the class war being waged against the working class around the world," WSWS Labor Editor Jerry White said, opening up the online meeting. "For nearly three years, the ruling class has pursued a deliberate policy of driving up unemployment to terrorize workers and beat back their demands for wage increases that keep up with record inflation.

"The mass firings and layoffs underscore the scale of the betrayal and treachery of the UAW apparatus, which rammed through contracts last fall after its phony 'stand-up' strike," White said. UAW President Shawn Fain and the rest of the UAW bureaucracy lied to workers when they claimed in the contract "highlights" that 3,200 supplemental employees would be converted to full-time employment within the first year of the agreement, and after that any supplemental employee with nine months of service "will automatically have full-time status."

In fact, White said, "the UAW gave Stellantis the green light to fire nearly half of the 5,300 SEs it employed, along with closing facilities and

laying off thousands of full-time workers."

White said the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, which is part of the IWA-RFC, called on workers to oppose the UAW-backed deal and warned in a November 6 statement: "In addition to dropping our core demands, the deals will give the corporations the most important thing they are after: a free hand to decimate jobs as they transition to electric vehicle production."

Concluding his remarks, White said the IWA-RFC is fighting for the following demands:

- Immediately end all job cuts and reinstate all those already affected!
- Reduce the length of the workday and increase pay to account for the fewer hours needed to produce EVs and make up for decades of stagnant wages!
- Unite across borders to fight the global jobs massacre!
- Place the auto industry under social ownership and democratic workers' control!

"Just Transition" to EVs

Speaking next was Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist who ran for UAW president in 2022. "Each one of these attacks is being carried out by a transnational company like Ford. But the unions praise nationalism and 'working with the companies'—and workers lose in every instance.

"As workers, we don't have any differences with each other internationally. We're all in this for the same thing: to make a living and provide for our families. An attack on workers anywhere needs to be seen as an attack on all of us."

The massive job cuts, he said, completely debunked the lie by Fain and President Biden that the UAW won a "just transition" to electric vehicles. To protect jobs, he said, workers had to expand the network of rank-and-file committees and prepare strike action to defend all jobs.

Workers have to fight to put the auto industry under public ownership, he said, so labor-saving technologies can be used to shorten the workweek and sharply improve living standards, not throw workers into the streets.

"I ran as a socialist for UAW president because I'm not talking about bargaining with these transnational corporations. I'm talking about workers using our power. Whether it's working conditions or the issue of who benefits from technological growth, the working class or the ruling class, or if it's the onslaught against the Palestinian people, the working

class has to be united as a class.

“We see massive strike votes and an immense will to fight, but it keeps getting dead-ended by these bureaucracies. We need to get together and organize but not under the leadership of those who betray us. We need to have rank-and-file committees in every plant to do it.”

“If we collectively come together as a whole, the power that we have really is unstoppable.”

Hannah, a former SE at the suburban Detroit Warren Truck plant, told the meeting, “I was terminated with no preparation, no warning. I was with the company for nine months and had a perfect track record, never missing a day or coming in late, and never being taken off a job for poor performance.

“It’s crucial that the full timers pay attention to what could be in store for them next. They may have a position in the company now, but for how long? Everybody has a job until they don’t.

“It’s not just management, it is the UAW as well,” she said. “We paid them dues as the lowest paid employees even though we didn’t have it. But we got no protection in return. They’re not fighting for our jobs. They’re telling us to file for unemployment.”

Railroad workers, coal miners, autoworkers, teachers, nurses and other workers, Hannah said, had to “fight collectively” because this is an “international crisis” and “nobody is coming to save us.” As long as the power remains in the hands of UAW apparatus and these big companies, she said, “we’re not going to get anywhere because that’s how the system is designed.”

Hannah said she was an active member of the Warren Truck Rank-and-File Committee and that everything the IWA-RFC had warned workers about Fain’s phony rhetoric and “stand up” strikes “has come to be true.” The IWA-RFC is “fighting besides us, and they are fighting for us.” She urged other workers to build rank-and-file committees in their plants, concluding, “If we collectively come together as a whole, the power that we have really is unstoppable.”

Anna, a full-time worker and member of the GM Flint Assembly Rank-and-File Committee, said, “The corporations and ruling classes have a plan and we, as the workers, must also have a plan.” Since the narrow passage of the UAW’s supposedly “historic contract,” she said, the union has kept workers in the dark about the \$50,000 buyout offers, which was “completely insufficient given high inflation.” Workers were also being subjected to freezing temperatures in the plant with no help from UAW reps.

“What I learned as a member of the rank-and-file committee during the phony stand up strike is that we tell workers the truth and fight for a way for workers on the shop floor to see the big picture. We cannot place any confidence in the UAW bureaucracy. We have to win workers to the IWA-RFC, so we can exert our own interests as workers all over the world.”

International jobs massacre

Dietmar Henning, a WSWS writer from Germany, said “a jobs massacre is unfolding in Europe unlike anything seen since World War II.” Studies estimate that up to 40 percent of auto jobs in Germany will be lost as a result of the transition to EVs, he said, meaning that the jobs of over 300,000 of the 800,000 workers currently employed in the industry could be wiped out.

The US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine has also put pressure on profits, and German companies have fallen behind in the global competition to build cheaper and technically more sophisticated EV models. “Tesla has built one of its Giga factories near Berlin, where workers will make 20 percent less than their colleagues at Mercedes, BMW and Porsche,” Henning said. As a result, Ford, VW, Bosch, Continental and Stellantis-owned PSA and Opel were cutting tens of thousands of jobs.

By law in Germany, he said, the unions sit on the corporations’ supervisory boards and work to suppress any opposition to management’s demands. IG Metall and the CGT unions in Spain engaged in a bidding war for new EV production, which resulted in lowering Ford workers’ wages in Valencia, Spain, and the planned closure of the Ford Saarlouis plant by 2025, resulting in the loss of the remaining 3,850 jobs.

“What your experience in the US and our experience in Germany and Europe have shown is that the fight to defend jobs and wages must be waged against the union bureaucracies and by uniting with your colleagues throughout the world through the IWA-RFC.”

“The huge corporations and their shareholders have the same goal: to squeeze as much profit out of the working class as possible”

Throughout the meeting workers in other rank-and-file committees, including workers on the railroads, UPS workers, nurses and academic workers, stressed that the corporations were slashing jobs in every industry and that the fight to defend jobs required mobilizing the working class against the capitalist system. This involves challenging the so-called “right,” upheld by both the Democrats and Republicans, of the corporate and financial oligarchy to condemn millions to poverty and endless wars.

Bill, a member of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, said what autoworkers are facing is the same struggle as workers in other industries. “The largest railroad carriers in North America have been raided by activist hedge funds,” he said. “The huge corporations and their shareholders have the same goal: to squeeze as much profit out of the working class as possible.”

After the railroads were raided, there was a 45 percent decrease in employees across these companies. The railroads became the most profitable industry in America, but the cuts choked the rail system so much it was affecting production in other sectors of the economy. “The CEOs were called before Congress and did this song and dance about hiring people but the job cuts continued, including 1,300 maintenance of way workers that Union Pacific is laying off.”

After going three years without raises, Bill said, workers at three railroad unions voted down the contract and prepared to strike in the fall of 2022. “All the railroad workers could have walked out, but the union bureaucracies kept agreeing to ‘cooling off’ period extensions, giving Congress time to react and impose the contract on us.” Biden and the majority of the Democrats and Republicans in Congress, with the collusion of the Teamsters and other rail union bureaucracies, imposed a ban on a strike by railroad workers and mandated a contract that workers had been voting against.

“Educate your brothers and sisters and help stand against the bureaucracy”

Mike from the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee said, “The new

contract Teamster President Sean O'Brien got passed was a sellout that ended up costing a lot of part-timers their jobs. The company opened up seven new facilities that are fully automated. Most of these part-time workers have been there forever getting minimum wage, barely making ends meet and even sleeping in their cars. Now a lot of them are going to lose their jobs because of automation.

"UPS CEO Carol Tome bragged in an interview about how profitable this contract was going to be over the next five years, with ground breaking revenue and all the savings from automated jobs. She did horrible things at Home Depot and is now doing it at UPS.

"So, it all starts with everybody at the bottom, the rank and file, the members, you. You come together and educate your brothers and sisters and help stand against the bureaucracy and you have each other's backs.

"Obviously automation can be good if it's put in the right way. It can make people's lives easier. But the way corporate America is using it, it's to make more profits. They're putting profits over people. That's just disgusting. So, we fully support the autoworkers and their struggle. We're all going through the same thing."

Summing up the meeting, Will Lehman explained, "This is a meeting of different sections of workers, workers are coming forward over a variety of different issues, and the commonality of the class struggle that we're all entering into. While we are initially meeting over the firing of 500 autoworkers, there are attacks on the working class that are going on through all the different sectors and different countries internationally.

"Different struggles are going to continue to bring workers to look for a political outlook. And we need to be the ones to provide that. I think this meeting today is definitely an excellent example of workers coming forward, realizing what the political problems are, and then agreeing on political issues. But it's going to be up to us to grow it. If we're going to have a solution, it's going to be us moving as a class against capitalism."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact