

“We should have had every automotive plant out on strike”

Kokomo, Indiana Stellantis workers discuss conditions after UAW betrayal of 2023 contract fight

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2 April 2024

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A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team traveled to Kokomo, Indiana Saturday to speak to Stellantis workers about the ongoing destruction of jobs, which has followed the betrayal of the 2023 contract battle by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy.

Stellantis employs nearly 8,000 workers at four engine, casting and transmission plants in the city, which is located 65 miles north of Indianapolis. Under last year’s labor agreement, which UAW President Shawn Fain and US President Joe Biden claimed was a “record” contract, workers in area have been hit by an accelerating wave of job cuts.

Last month, Stellantis put the nearby Tipton Transmission plant up for sale. The UAW approved the closure of the 781,000-square-foot facility, which employed up to 900 workers in late 2021, along with 10 parts distribution centers across the country.

Although Fain and UAW Vice President Rich Boyer told temporary workers they would be rolled over to full-time positions under the new contract, the UAW bureaucracy gave Stellantis a green light to permanently terminate at least 2,300 temporary workers across the company, including hundreds in the Kokomo area.

In addition, hundreds of workers at the Indianapolis Transmission Plant have been put on weeks of temporary layoffs.

Working closely with the Biden administration, Fain prevented an industry wide walkout in September 2023, and instead called a bogus “stand up” strike, which never involved more than one quarter of the UAW membership. After forcing workers to continue producing profits for the companies, Fain & Co. rammed through pro-company contracts that have opened the door for massive job cuts as the industry transitions to electric vehicles.

Since then, Fain has become a leading public spokesman for Biden claiming that the long-time shill for big business is a champion of the working class. In turn, the Democratic president has used the services of the trade union bureaucracy to suppress opposition to Israel’s slaughter of the Palestinians and force workers to bear the cost of the escalating military confrontation with Russia and China.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently sat down with two Stellantis workers in Kokomo to discuss the current conditions facing workers, the lessons of the UAW betrayal and the fight by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to unite workers across borders against job cuts.

The workers used the pseudonyms “Nikki” and “John” to protect them from retaliation from management and the UAW bureaucracy.

A punitive attendance policy and job cuts

John began by describing the punitive attendance policy that has been put in place under the new labor agreement. “We’re not seen as humans with the higher attendance policy. We show up everyday but there are times we have to spend with kids or we have an emergency. They’ve made it more difficult, especially when we’re working 8-10 hours a day, plus commuting. They talk about ‘work-life balance’ and the quality of life for kids, but then there’s no time off.

“I plan to get to work 20-30 minutes early in case I have a flat tire or something. But once there was a bad accident on the highway that required lifeline emergency vehicles and I was two hours late. Under the new policy, I could get one point for something out of my control.”

“If you’re two hours late and don’t have any lunch break time left, they can give you two points,” Nikki said. “It used to be you could have six absences and six tardies but now they’ve combined them into ‘occurrences.’ If you get nine they can fire you.”

She added, “They make you exhaust your FMLA [unpaid Family Medical and Leave Act time off] claim before you can get sick leave or the short-term benefits for an injury or severe illness. That’s 12 weeks with no pay.

“They also restricted what you can use a PAA (Paid Absentee Allowance) days for. They allow colonoscopies, but they are starting to prevent you from taking your kids to the doctor or things like that. You used to get the day before a colonoscopy to prep, and the day after just in case. Now, you have to use a PAA day or vacation day and give them five days notice. But if it is in the middle of the week, you have to do the prep with a laxative at work while you’re on the line!”

The workers described how hundreds of temporary workers in the area, also known as supplemental employees (SEs), have been fired since January 13. As brutal as it was for Stellantis workers in Michigan and Ohio where many SEs were terminated via a robo-call, they said, SEs in Indiana received no warning at all.

“The UAW had known the week before that the SEs weren’t supposed to come in because they were being fired but they let them in because management needed them,” Nikki said. “The following Monday, they walked up to the gates and their company badges didn’t work. One girl who lives in Wabash, an hour away, drove all the way here to find out she didn’t have a job.

“It didn’t only affect a lot of young workers and single moms, but it also affected older workers who were told they were going to be hired in. So it was obviously a shock when people’s badges didn’t work. Full-

timers were pissed off the SEs weren't treated right. It is a brotherhood in there. Yea, they pick on each other but they still look out for each other. Then they get treated like that!"

Nikki continued, "It was in the contract we had in 1999 that you hired as a temp. Some were one week, some of us were three weeks before we got hired. It was not years of being a temp. The next group were hired around 2007 and they were not flipped right away. This is when it started. At some point in time, the company decided they were paying them too much and fired them the next week. They said, 'If you still want your job, you can come back at the starting pay.'"

Nikki said that some of the fired SEs had responded positively to a petition being circulated by the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) faction of the UAW bureaucracy, which is backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and *Labor Notes*. The UAWD said that once 1,000 signatures were gathered, they would submit it to the company and "notify the UAW-Stellantis department."

"They were coming to me and saying, 'This looks good. This is what we want.' I told them this was a cover for Fain. These people (UAWD) were with him. Sign it, I said, but you are not going to hear another word about it because the UAW leaders okayed all the firings. You notice that there's no word about what happened to that petition."

Fain and the bogus "Stand up" strike

Nikki said that in the run-up to the September 14, 2023 contract expiration date workers were enthusiastic over the statements by Fain that he would strike all three auto companies. But she was more cautious given Fain's long record of collaborating with the company, including in pushing through massive concessions during the 2009 auto industry restructuring overseen by the Obama-Biden administration.

"I work next to people with less seniority. They don't know how it works. They were saying okay, here we go, we're going on strike. What we heard for two weeks until the midnight deadline was that everybody will walk out. Some were looking at their phones counting it down, we're getting ready to walk. But then only a few plants strike and the rest of us are still at work.

"I was like, now you see it, now you see the way this works. Fain had these weekly updates and workers were still counting down, saying, 'Oh, it's gonna be us walking out now.' But the third time, people were saying, 'Okay, we're not going on strike.' That's why Fain mentioned Kokomo in one of his online events, saying 'Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about you.' He says this while we're stockpiling parts for Jeep in Toledo, our biggest customer.

"The Toledo Jeep plant was on strike for 45 days, and we are on 45 days critical status pushing out parts round the clock," Nikki said. By continuing production during the phony strike, Nikki said, the UAW bureaucracy ensured that workers would face layoffs afterwards.

"We built up a stockpile of 26,000 transmissions. We have no racks to put them in which is why we got these two weeks of layoffs. ITP1 (Indiana Transmission Plant No. 1) got two down weeks and they just extended it to five. The new workers here are thinking these are free vacations. But we remember the old days when we were looking at 10-18 months off until the market picks back up. These workers have never experienced a massive layoff. But now they are coming."

John explained how the UAW bureaucracy pushed through the contract on false pretenses. "They dangled the carrot in front of the workers: 'Everybody was going to get their attendance points wiped out. Everybody is going to get a little bit of raise and said were going to flip you to full time.' Some people have yet to get their cost of living and they

fired so many SEs," he said.

Nikki said in the course of the struggle she warned workers about Fain. "He was the one who voted to hand all our things back to the company. He was on the UAW-Chrysler Negotiating Committee in 2009 and cut all the stuff he's claiming to get back. When this all came out, then the mood changed to 'We don't like this guy.' When we did not walk out it went to 'We hate him now.'"

The two workers said they followed the election campaign of Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker who ran as a socialist candidate for UAW president in the first round of the UAW election in 2022. Lehman won nearly 5,000 votes, despite the deliberate effort by the UAW bureaucracy to disenfranchise rank-and-file members.

When it came to Fain and incumbent UAW president Ray Curry, John said, "It was basically like Biden and Trump. You didn't have anybody to vote for who wasn't a career politician. Will was fighting for us, but he wasn't one of the final two.

"Most of the people who run for these offices have not been on the shop floor for 10 to 20 years. That's why they want a union job because you can sit in their office and get paid. I knew the steward got paid double time plus a bigger profit-sharing check than the rest of us. With the strike, they boasted they spent as little out of the strike fund as possible.

"We should have had every single automotive plant out in the country. With the strike fund, we could have been on strike for almost three months. That would have forced them to come to the table," John said. "The rich people can't do anything without us."

War and the fight for the international unity of the working class

The WSWS reporters explained the Biden administration used the trade union bureaucracies to block or neuter strikes at UPS, the docks, in auto and other industries, which threatened to disrupt the preparations for war against Russia and China. Whether Biden or Trump was in the White House, they said, the ruling class was waging a war on two fronts: for global conquest abroad and a war against the working class at home to pay for it.

"The next thing is it's going to turn into a war with China over Taiwan," John said. "They're even asking retired military people to come back." He worried that "a guy with dementia" was leading the US into a nuclear war.

"You just have the Republicans and Democrats, and neither are for the workers," John added. "That's why we need another party. I've got a son in his 20s and he's struggling and living paycheck-to-paycheck. He's got two kids and they are trying to find a place to rent. That's \$900 a month. Then doing the groceries on top of that and you have gas. If you're single you have to have a babysitter. I mean you can't make ends meet. I tell my kids there is going to be a civil war or a revolution."

John said the betrayal of the unions was due to "corruption." While there was no lack of corruption in the UAW bureaucracy, the WSWS reporters said, the transformation of the trade unions into direct instruments of the corporations was bound up with the historic changes in capitalist production over the last half century. The nationalist and pro-capitalist unions around the world had no progressive response to globalization and instead abandoned any resistance to the corporations and imposed whatever demands "their" ruling class had to increase "competitiveness" and profitability.

The WSWS reporters described how the German and Spanish trade unions pit Ford workers against each other in bidding war over where Ford would carry out EV production. John said, "Imagine what would have happened if the unions would have worked together and said, 'No,

this is what we want. We're not going to run your operations. You got a choice. You either keep two or none, right?"

But the opposite has occurred: The IG Metall union in Germany is collaborating with Ford to shut its plant in Saarlouis while workers at the plant in Valencia, Spain face more than 1,100 job cuts and a four-year wage freeze enforced by the UGT union.

In opposition to the nationalist trade unions, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting to unify workers across national borders in a industrial counter-offensive to defend jobs and living standards. This fight is inseparable from the fight against imperialist war and the demands for endless "sacrifice" to fund the wars for corporate interests.

Both workers responded positively to the initiative being taken up by the IWA-RFC and agreed to spread the word about rank-and-file committees among their fellow Stellantis workers in Kokomo. "Workers internationally are being trampled and that's why we need to band together," John said.

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