

Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee exposes dangers at Stellantis- Samsung SDI battery plant in city

George Kirby
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Reports from the newly opened StarPlus Energy battery plant in Kokomo, Indiana reveal the brutal regime that is being imposed on workers with the collaboration of the UAW, which is recruiting workers for the plant, a joint venture of Stellantis and South Korea-based Samsung SDI. The conditions at the plant, including the abuse of workers and unsafe conditions, were recently brought to light by a member of the Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee.

The impact of the “record” 2023 national auto contract negotiated by the United Auto Workers, in reality a record sellout, is being felt by autoworkers in Kokomo. The city is home to four Stellantis transmission plants and the newly opened StarPlus Energy battery facility.

The signing of the 2023 sellout was quickly followed by the firing of thousands of temporary, or supplemental, workers (SEs) by Stellantis, who had been falsely promised full time jobs under the new contract. Thousands more workers have been laid off at Detroit area assembly plants, including 2,450 workers last week at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant, with workers being informed via robo calls. General Motors and Ford have also imposed layoffs and eliminated jobs.

In Indiana, the Stellantis Tipton Transmission plant has been put up for sale with the UAW’s blessings, gutting close to 1,000 jobs. In Kokomo Indiana, where four transmission plants are located, Kokomo Transmission Plant (KTP), Indiana Transmission Plant (ITP), Kokomo Engine Plant (KEP), and Kokomo Casting Plant (KCP), 387 SEs were fired.

The cuts are part of the drive by the auto companies to impose the full costs of the shift to electric vehicle production, which requires fewer parts and less labor, onto the backs of workers.

To partially offset the loss of dues income, the UAW

has sought to organize new EV plants such as the Stellantis/Samsung SDI battery operation in Kokomo. Stellantis has enlisted the aid of the UAW to recruit laid off workers at the transmission plants for the battery plant, where wages are low and working conditions deplorable.

For its part, the UAW has already made it clear that if it is allowed to organize StarPlus Energy it will maintain a substandard wage scale.

Since the beginning of the year, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has reported only one health-related issue at the StarPlus Energy plant in Kokomo, in April. However, a member of the Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee uncovered reports of ongoing fires and worker injuries taking place at the battery plant. This included multiple workers suffering from heat stroke throughout the month of August. Multiple fires were also reported, including one posted by workers on social media.

The lithium ion batteries produced by StarPlus are extremely hazardous and prone to fires, which are hard to extinguish and emit toxic smoke. A lithium ion battery fire last year at GM’s flagship Factory Zero plant in Detroit raged for seven hours and forced the evacuation of the facility.

StarPlus recruiters are holding ongoing presentations inside the UAW Local 1166 hall to recruit workers. According to information provided by multiple sources, workers would work extended alternating shifts used at many other assembly and parts plants, also known as alternative work schedule (AWS). This is used to ensure the company extracts more profit with greater productivity from workers.

At first many workers were eager to work at the battery plant. “Everyone heard the hours and thought it was

wonderful,” the Kokomo RFC member said. “It looked to be 12 hours with 3 days one week then 4 days the following week.”

However, in social media posts, workers have outlined the grim reality of working inside the StarPlus plant. One post stated, “Place is a joke supervisors will fire you just because of past interactions at different companies then hold your check and not even mail it out to you on time. -10/10 would not recommend working here.”

Another worker said, “Fired after being treated for covid and heat exhaustion. Do not recommend. The \$19 an hour isn’t worth walking through a construction site, one running bathroom, and no drinking water in September. Wait and being pointed for not returning to the floor for fear of carbon monoxide poisoning after 11 workers being sent to the hospital. I’ll go back to helping special needs adults happily.”

The Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee member said, “They keep extending the shutdown and then the local UAW went to Detroit with a rumor of a strike vote. But no word went out to us about voting for a strike. If we strike, we have all these transmissions stockpiled.” She described this process as planned, not coincidental, as officials within the UAW local were recruiting workers for the StarPlus plants. “I saw the layoffs at Warren Truck, People [here] don’t know what’s coming. They are trying to put the battery plants under the UAW.”

Under the schedule in place at StarPlus, workers will work 36 hours one week and 48 hours the next week based on a 24-hour, seven-day operation. Seniority workers are promised that their level of seniority will be maintained when they are transferred from the Kokomo transmission plants. The detail left out from this is whether all workers will be guaranteed full seniority at various tier levels. Holiday schedules will be considered full workdays. Time off will only be approved “based on ability to safely cover plant operations,” i.e., workers will be forced to come in to cover staffing shortages.

Commenting on the ongoing recruitment drive, a Stellantis Kokomo worker said, “If I could land a day shift spot and hold it to make the same money, I’d 100% go no matter how shi**ty it seems. That time with my family is invaluable to me and I’d do just about anything to get it. My concern is transferring to a harder, more strict job, just to still be stuck on 2nds or 3rds. Curious how shift selections will go with being Starplus, others being [local] 685 or 1166.”

An independent journalist posted the following on social media after interviewing both native born and

immigrant workers recruited to the plant who are employed by StarPlus. He explained that the abuse of immigrant workers was particularly severe at the plant. However, both native-born and immigrant workers are subject to low pay and forced to labor under appalling conditions, including lack of running water, no safety equipment, with workers being subjected to skin irritation and rashes from hydraulic washers splashing chemicals.

This confirms the warnings issued by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) on the significance of the drive to implement EV production. The so called “work-life balance” implemented by the “historic” contract was to eliminate thousands of internal combustion engine-related jobs and to push those workers to take low paid jobs subject to long hours and unsafe conditions. In advance of the 2023 contract negotiations the IWA-RFC unanimously adopted the following demands:

- Immediate release of the list of planned plant closures!
- Not a single job loss or plant closure in the transition to EV!
- If EVs require less labor time to produce, then reduce hours and increase pay!
- Unite across borders to prevent a race to the bottom!
- Place the auto industry under social ownership subject to democratic worker control!

To take up this fight workers must expand the IWA-RFC, including those in and around Kokomo, in defense of the thousands of jobs of those remaining at KEP, KTP, ITP and Kokomo Casting that are on the chopping block. Workers in Kokomo have formed the Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee not to reform the UAW but to restore power on the shop floor independently of the pro-corporate union bureaucrats, to take control of safety, line speed and jobs against the dictates of management.



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