

A critical assessment of UAW President Shawn Fain's appointment of Laura Dickerson to head union's Ford department

Tim Rivers
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On June 16 Shawn Fain announced the promotion of Laura Dickerson from UAW Region 1A Director to vice president on the UAW International Executive Board and head of the union's Ford Department. Flanked by outgoing Vice President Chuck Browning, Fain called Dickerson's appointment as the first African American to head the union's Ford department an "historic step forward for our union."

Dickerson, in her remarks, echoed Fain's rhetoric claiming, "Our members stood up, took on the Big Three, and showed the world what union power looks like. I'm ready to build on that member-led momentum."

Browning, who oversaw the UAW's collaboration with Ford during the devastating 2023 contract negotiations, praised Dickerson's "focus on the core values of service to our members, their families and communities, as well as a strong knowledge of bargaining and interpreting collective bargaining contracts."

For rank-and-file Ford workers Dickerson's rise signals not progress, but a continuation of the UAW's decades-long record of betrayals. Her career, based at UAW Local 600 and Ford's global flagship Rouge complex, spans a period during which the destruction of jobs, safety, and living standards have defined the union's partnership with corporate management.

The period of Dickerson's rise through the ranks of the apparatus was a time that Ford Rouge workers and the broader membership experienced a dramatic deterioration of jobs, income, working conditions and safety on the job while the union apparatus has fattened its wallet.

She began her career at Local 600 in 1997, a period when the Rouge complex—once a symbol of union power—was already in decline. By the late 1990s, Ford had shifted production to non-union plants in the US South as well as to operations in Mexico while leveraging the UAW's concessions on tiered wages and benefits to fatten profits.

Shortly after Dickerson began work, the Rouge suffered one of the darkest events in the plant's history.

On February 1, 1999, an explosion at the Rouge Power Plant killed six workers and seriously injured 38 more. The blast, caused by a buildup of methane gas in a poorly maintained boiler, ripped through the facility, trapping workers in a horrific inferno. Survivor Michael Harris, in a 2000 interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, recalled, "The alarms never went off. We had

complained for months about gas leaks, but management said repairs were too costly. The union reps (including Dickerson's mentors) told us to 'work safe' but never shut down the plant."

Ford paid a mere \$7 million in OSHA fines—a tiny fraction of its profits—while the UAW *set the tone for a rising toll of injuries and deaths* that was to follow by declining to pursue criminal charges against the company.

Dickerson, at the time an aspiring figure in Local 600, remained silent on the issue, focusing instead on "rebuilding trust" in the company that was criminally responsible for the death and maiming of workers.

The coverup of Ford's responsibility for the explosion set a precedent for further cover-ups and betrayals. Under Dickerson's watch safety grievances were routinely buried in arbitration, enabling Ford to prioritize production over workers' lives. Just in the past 14 months a partial list of deaths at Rouge includes Tywaun Long, Terriel Wooten and Darrius Williams.

As chairperson of her unit from 2002 to 2010, she presided over the elimination of hundreds of jobs at the Dearborn Stamping Plant, where workers were forced into early retirement or buyouts as Ford shuttered departments.

Her role on the 2011 UAW Ford National Negotiating Team demonstrated her loyalty to the company-union partnership. That contract, negotiated under the shadow of the 2009 Obama auto bailout, institutionalized the two-tier wage system, slashing pay for new hires by nearly 50 percent. A 2011 *World Socialist Web Site* analysis noted that the UAW "treated workers as a disposable commodity," while Dickerson solidarized herself with those who overrode rank-and-file opposition to the sellout.

By 2020, when she became the first African American woman appointed as an assistant regional director, the Rouge complex had lost over 60 percent of its peak workforce with the remaining employees subjected to relentless speedup, mandatory overtime and a vast erosion of job-safety.

The past decade has seen Ford accelerate the assault on jobs, particularly with the transition to electric vehicles (EVs). In January 2024, Ford announced the elimination of 1,500 jobs at the Rouge Electric Vehicle Center (REVC), the facility that had been touted as a guarantee for the future. Workers were confronted with the grim choices of a transfer to the Kentucky Truck Plant, accept a buyout, or possible termination.

“They promised us EVs would mean job security,” REVC worker Anita Patel told the *World Socialist Web Site* in March 2024. “Now they’re telling us to uproot our families or lose everything. The UAW did nothing to stop this.”

These cuts followed the fraudulent 2023 “Stand Up Strike,” which both Fain and Dickerson hailed as a historic victory. In reality, the strike—limited to selective plants and punctuated by theatrics like Fain’s “throwing the Big Three’s proposals in the trash”—was designed to isolate those who walked the picket line while suppressing the broad sentiment for all-out strike action.

The resulting Agreement sanctioned the closure of 18 plants, including the historic Chicago Assembly Plant, while failing to restore pensions or eliminate tiers. “The UAW sold us out,” said Dearborn Truck Plant worker Jamal Carter in a WSWWS interview. “They let Ford keep temps as second-class citizens and gave us raises that don’t beat inflation. Now they’re cutting jobs anyway.”

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the lethal consequences of the UAW’s collusion with Ford. Despite outbreaks in plants, management—with union backing—enforced compulsory 12-hour shifts, denying workers adequate PPE or ventilation. Tywaun Long, a 46-year-old Dearborn Truck worker, collapsed on April 17, 2024, in the wake of suffering a severe case of COVID, almost certainly contracted in the plant, and facing compulsory 60-hour work-weeks. His death, ruled a heart attack, sparked outrage among coworkers. Studies have proved that workers are many times more likely to suffer a heart attack after a severe case of COVID.

“Tywaun told the union reps he was exhausted, but they said the contract allowed overtime,” his sister, Latisha Long, told the WSWWS. “They treated him like a machine.” Just one year later, on April 17, 2025, Tyrriel Wooten died after suffering speed-up, forced work and an emergency operation. His death coincided with Ford’s announcement of record quarterly profits.

In March 2025, Ford escalated its war on workers by launching the Global Security Task Force, a nationwide initiative that deployed undercover police, tracking dogs, and facial recognition cameras in the plants. Workers at the Kansas City Assembly Plant reported being subjected to random bag searches and interrogations.

“They brought dogs into the break room,” said Kansas City worker Maria Gonzalez. “It’s like we’re in a prison, not a workplace. The UAW reps just told us to ‘comply’ and file grievances later.” Ford was aligning its attack on the workforce with the Trump administration’s mass deportation of immigrant workers from all industries.

In 2024, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids at Ford supplier plants in Ohio and Tennessee led to the arrest of 150 workers, many of whom had criticized safety conditions. The UAW’s response was abject silence. “They say ‘American jobs for American workers,’ but that’s just a cover for splitting us up,” said Diego Martínez, a Ford worker quoted in the WSWWS. “We’re all getting exploited, no matter where we’re from.”

The UAW’s celebration of Dickerson’s “historic” appointment as the first African American woman on the executive board is a cynical diversion. Throughout her career, Dickerson has enforced policies that disproportionately harm black workers. In 2022, black

workers at the Rouge complex filed a federal lawsuit alleging discrimination in overtime allocation, citing UAW complicity.

Dickerson, then Region 1A Director, dismissed the suit as “a distraction from our collective fight.” This further exposes Fain’s “progressive” posturing, which masks his alliance with Trump’s economic nationalism. The UAW’s endorsement of tariffs on foreign vehicles—a policy Dickerson has praised as “protecting American jobs”—while justifying xenophobic deportations, serves to pit workers against their international co-workers that are even now being thrust into a united struggle against exploitation and war.

The cynical way that identity politics based on race, gender and ethnic origin are used to divide workers and obscure fundamental class issues was revealed in the report issued earlier this week by the court appointed UAW Monitor Neil Barofsky. It revealed that Fain regularly used threats and abusive language in dealing with subordinates.

Among other things Barofsky revealed that Fain retaliated against UAW Secretary Treasurer Margaret Mock, who is African American, for refusing to authorize dubious expenditures by stripping her of duties. He orchestrated this through Dickerson and another black UAW executive board member LaShawn English. Fain later admitted to the monitor that he did this for appearance’s sake, stating it would be “better coming from her than me, a white guy.

Dickerson’s record proves she will continue and deepen Fain’s collaboration with management, sacrificing jobs and safety to boost Ford’s stock price.

The lessons of the past three decades are clear: the UAW is not a vehicle for change in the interest of workers, but an agent of management in imposing discipline and sacrifice on the backs of workers.

Rank-and-file committees, free from UAW control, are already emerging in plants such as the Rouge. The investigation by the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees into the unsafe conditions that led to the death of Ronnie Adams Sr. at the Stellantis Engine Plant in Dundee, Michigan is gaining support.

We encourage workers to join with the IWA-RFC and fight for the unity of all workers—across race, nationality, and industry—as the only force capable of defeating the capitalist onslaught and joining with their class brothers and sisters everywhere in the global struggle for a socialist future.



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