

Outpouring of support for Ford Rouge worker victimized for opposing Trump

Jerry White**14 January 2026**

The thuggish character of the Trump administration was on full display this week during President Donald Trump's visit to the Ford Rouge Complex in Dearborn, Michigan. The appearance was carefully stage-managed, with Trump touring the Dearborn Truck Plant alongside Ford executives and CEO Bill Ford Jr., intended to provide a propaganda backdrop for Trump's claims of a "booming" auto industry and a revival of American manufacturing.

As Trump passed on an elevated walkway above the factory floor, a Ford worker shouted denunciations at the president, including calling him a "pedophile protector," a reference to Trump's long-established association with the late Jeffrey Epstein and efforts by the political establishment to bury the full truth about Epstein's connections. The worker was later identified as Thomas "TJ" Sabula, a 40-year-old assembly-line worker and member of United Auto Workers Local 600.

Trump responded with rage. He twice shouted "Fuck you" at Sabula and, as he walked away, raised his middle finger in the worker's direction. The exchange was recorded on video by another Ford worker, quickly circulated on social media, and broadcast on national television.

The White House defended the thuggish behavior. The president's communications director Steven Cheung denounced Sabula as "a lunatic" and declared that the president's profanity-laced response was "appropriate and unambiguous."

The language was calculated. Trump officials have portrayed any opposition to the administration's fascist measures as irrational and dangerous and thereby deserving of repression. During an appearance on Fox News Monday, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt called Renee Nicole Good, the 37-year-old mother of three murdered by ICE agents in Minneapolis, a "deranged lunatic."

Sabula was suspended without pay pending an investigation, in clear retaliation for publicly confronting the president. Reports also circulated that the worker who filmed the incident was disciplined or fired, underscoring the atmosphere of intimidation inside the plant and management's role in enforcing political conformity on the shop floor.

Sabula publicly defended his actions. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, he said he had "no regrets whatsoever" and

warned that he was being "targeted for political retribution" for "embarrassing Trump in front of his friends." Sabula explained that he was roughly 60 feet away and that Trump could hear him "very, very, very clearly." His remarks, he said, were directed at Trump's handling of the Epstein matter and the broader culture of impunity surrounding the political elite.

"I don't feel as though fate looks upon you often, and when it does, you better be ready to seize the opportunity," Sabula said. "And today I think I did that."

There has been an outpouring of popular support for the Ford worker. As of this writing, GoFundMe campaigns established on Sabula's behalf have raised more than three-quarters of a million dollars with more than 30,000 donations from the US and other countries, most of them in smaller contributions of \$20-\$25 from workers, retirees and other defenders of free speech.

The comment of one worker was typical:

Donald, you are not our king. We the people of the United States do not tolerate leaders who demand fealty or attempt to punish and silence us into submission! We will stand with our brother Thomas Sabula, and his boldness and courage will be rewarded.

Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist autoworker who ran for UAW president in 2022, issued a statement sharply denouncing the retaliation against Sabula.

I categorically denounce the suspension of Ford Rouge worker TJ Sabula for exercising his basic democratic right to free speech during Donald Trump's visit to the Dearborn Truck Plant. This act of retaliation is a warning shot aimed at the entire working class. Every worker must rally to Sabula's defense and demand his immediate and unconditional reinstatement.

Lehman continued:

Sabula committed no offense. He voiced what millions of workers think and feel about a president who embodies corruption, repression and violence. Trump's response—screaming profanities at a worker and raising his middle finger—was a political statement. It was the instinctive reaction of a thuggish representative of the oligarchy who answers opposition with intimidation and barely concealed threats of violence.

Lehman added, condemning the UAW apparatus:

This makes all the more criminal the role of Shawn Fain and the UAW apparatus. Fain's embrace of Trump's tariffs and economic nationalism is a conscious alignment with a reactionary and increasingly authoritarian regime. His silence in the face of Sabula's suspension exposes the UAW leadership as an auxiliary of management and the state, hostile to the democratic rights of workers.

Lehman concluded:

The defense of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to the corporations, the courts or the union bureaucracy. It requires the independent mobilization of the working class through rank-and-file committees. An attack on one worker is an attack on all!

Sabula's co-workers were equally angry. "People in the plant and beyond are ready to fight. You can see that from the response to the GoFundMe page," a young Dearborn Truck Plant worker said. "There is a growing and very widespread anti-Trump sentiment. Workers are standing up for one another."

"The UAW is supporting Trump every day," the worker added. "I see the lives of people are being hurt. They are starving. They are facing hardship, and they are tired of it."

Unable to ignore the outpouring of support, UAW bureaucrats finally roused themselves to comment on the victimization of Sabula Wednesday afternoon, more than 24 hours after the incident. In a perfunctory statement, Laura Dickerson, the head of the UAW Ford Department saying, "The UAW will ensure that our member receives the full protection of all negotiated contract language safeguarding his job and his rights as a union member."

This is worthless drivel. The UAW routinely sanctions the victimization of workers by management. It has done nothing to defend the jobs of workers laid off at Ford's Rouge Electric

Vehicle Center or the nearby GM Factory Zero plant, where the second shift was eliminated earlier this month, cutting 1,100 jobs, largely due to Trump's cancellation of EV consumer credits.

In fact, Trump's ability to stage his visit to Rouge rested entirely on the collaboration of the UAW bureaucracy. In the days leading up to Trump's appearance—and during it—the UAW's national and Local 600 leadership issued no statement opposing the visit, no warning to workers, and no defense of democratic rights.

Having embraced Trump's tariffs and economic nationalism, the UAW apparatus has aligned itself with the core of Trump's economic program, aimed at dividing workers internationally while enforcing corporate restructuring and layoffs at home. Trump entered Rouge confident that the union bureaucracy would suppress opposition, police dissent on the shop floor and collaborate with management and the state to maintain "order."

But Trump's fascist policies are provoking widespread opposition, from Detroit, where hundreds protested his appearance outside the Motor City Casino Tuesday, to Minneapolis where high school students are walking out to demand the removal of ICE, to the global opposition of workers and young people against the invasion of Venezuela and threats of war against Iran.

The incident on Tuesday gives political form to the cultural backwardness, brutality and violence of the corporate and financial oligarchy that rules the United States. Trump and the social interests he represents fear and hate all expressions of popular opposition, above all from the working class, which they correctly see as an existential threat to wealth, power and rule.

The WSWS calls on workers at Ford and throughout the auto industry to establish rank-and-file committees to demand the immediate reinstatement of Sabula and any other workers victimized. The defense of basic rights must be connected to a broader working class counteroffensive against the capitalist oligarchy and the Trump administration's conspiracy for dictatorship.



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