Nexteer worker fired for speaking up at UAW contract meeting: “I feel like management is protecting the union from us”

Antwiane Sanders
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The following is a statement of Antwiane Sanders, a worker at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan. He was fired last week for confronting UAW International Rep Jason Tuck at a contract rollout meeting on company premises in opposition to the fourth agreement being pushed by the UAW bureaucracy. At a membership meeting on May 17, after workers rejected the second agreement, Tuck cursed the workers, threatened them with the closure of the plant and walked out mid-meeting. Contact the Nexteer Workers Rank-and-File Committee at nexteerworkersrfc@gmail.com or text (947) 622-2198.

The rollout meeting

I raised the issue of new hires not getting their back pay. The company is considering people who have been there two to four years as new hires, and they’re saying they’re not giving them back pay because those workers are getting such a significant raise, anywhere from a $4 to a $6 raise. I was telling Carl McKee, the local bargaining committee chair, that the reason the contract didn’t go through in my opinion is because they didn’t give people their back pay. If they would have gave them the back pay, we wouldn’t be here for TA4, because the TA3 vote was so close and that’s all that held it up.

Jason Tuck, the international rep, got mad about me saying that. He balled his face up and told me I’m not saying nothing. I told him shut up, you’re a bum and I walked out of the meeting. As I was going down the stairs I told him he’s a disgrace to the UAW. We didn’t go back and forth. I left.

Tuck negotiated our last contract and no sooner than we signed it he had an international job. The only reason that contract went through is because a lot of people didn’t go and vote. He came to the May 17th meeting late and never said a word until I spoke up, and Carl was agreeing with me. Why is Carl agreeing with me if I’m not saying nothing?

What I did after I left

After I left the meeting I went straight to the break area because those were the instructions I had been given. A few weeks before, at the TA3 rollout, my plant manager told me not to go to the second meeting because I had already been to the first one with the AWS group. He told me to sit in the break area and wait for everybody to come back. That was the last instruction I had, not to go 5-S or clean up or find something to do. Sit in the break area and wait.

I wasn’t the only one that left the meeting and came back and sat in the break area. I saw two other people come and walk by me after I left. One of them is in my area and he’s willing to say that he left the meeting also. And there was a bunch of people who didn’t go to the meeting at all sitting in the break area. The meeting wasn’t as packed as it should have been.

After that I got right up, went to the line and started working. I was ready to work.

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How they built the case to fire me

That wasn't the first time they came after me. On Good Friday of this year, my name was on a list saying I wasn't supposed to come in. I told my supervisor and my plant manager: "I'm coming to work. If you send me home, I'll go home. But I'm coming to work, because you've got farm-ins [workers pulled from other departments] working my line. If there are people working my line that aren't from Department 74, from my understanding I have the right to be there."

Neither my supervisor nor my plant manager told me not to come in. They let me work. But a day or two later the plant manager told me I had violated someone's overtime. Two other people came in that day too and nothing happened to them. I was the only one suspended, three days. That became what they needed to fire me.

When I met with management, my supervisor and my plant manager both said the break area was where they would have wanted me to be. So why am I fired? They're talking about it coming from HR, from higher up.

My supervisor told me—and I don't want anybody to take my word for it but this is what I heard—he said he didn't know how it happened but they just told him to come put me on notice. I wasn't back in that break area for 15 to 20 minutes before he came and put me on notice. They did a fact-finding and fired me all in the same day.

The only person I said anything to in that meeting was Tuck. You can draw your own conclusions.

Man, if you could see some of the stuff these union people are doing to us. When we first started negotiating, I started wearing my red shirt. A backup committeeperson told me to stop wearing it. She said the union wasn't going to stick together, that they weren't anything. And she's a union representative.

I feel like management is protecting the union from us. How does that work? The union is supposed to be protecting us from management. They come and argue with us, then go laugh and joke with HR. I can't believe it.

What this is really about

I don't tell people how to vote. I tell my coworkers: vote what's best for you and your family. But I do ask questions. I've got a phone full of messages to Carl about the contract so I could give people the right information. I think before I speak. And I really believe that's why they did what they did, because I'm asking the questions to make sure everybody get the right answers. They think I've got the pull to influence how people vote.

All we're asking for is a start at $25 and get us to $28 or $30. We're not even being greedy. In the last five-year contract we didn't get one bonus. Not one. They want to take the $3,000 grievance off the table. They're denying back pay to people who've been there for years. And when workers raise these issues, they fire them.

I was fired for speaking up at a union meeting about back pay. My plant manager walked right past me in the break area and said nothing. Weeks before, he told me to sit there and wait. My supervisor confirmed that's where they wanted me. And I was still fired.

I just want to know where the integrity is. I love my job. I come to work, do my job, help fix the machines when they go down, cover for anybody, go wherever the supervisor needs me, no complaints. I just had a senior graduate from high school and I'm in the middle of planning an open house, and you fire me? It's amazing. I can't believe it, and then for it to be my union that sold me out…

— Antwiane "Tony" Sanders, Nexteer Automotive, Saginaw, Michigan

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