

# Ford fired worker over a \$1.95 cookie. The UAW told him to say sorry

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Ford Motor Company fired the 60-year-old electrician with a perfect attendance record over the allegation that he took a \$1.95 chocolate chip cookie without paying during his overnight shift on May 9. The worker, Kurt Kromm, was an 11-year veteran at the Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) in Louisville. Co-workers described him as “an excellent worker...attentive and very helpful.”

Kromm, who is diabetic, had gone to the break room during a 12-hour shift after feeling lightheaded from low blood sugar. When the first self-service kiosk, operated by Aramark, flashed a red “payment failed” screen, he moved over to a second terminal, a transaction that his bank statement confirmed.

A week later, Kromm was called into his supervisor’s office and was informed by his UAW representative that he was being fired for theft under the company’s zero-tolerance policy. He was escorted from the plant immediately, barred from retrieving his own tools from his work station.

In an interview with the blog *Shifting Gears*, Kromm, who averaged over 60 hours a week and earned roughly \$200,000 a year, stated, “I thought this all was a joke at first. I said, ‘If you wanted to get rid of me, you could’ve just asked. I’d quit. Why are you doing this over a cookie?’” Kromm reported at least five other KTP employees were fired under the same zero-tolerance policy.

The Aramark vending system at KTP operates through self-checkout payment kiosks located in plant break rooms, where food and beverage items are displayed in the open and workers are expected to scan and pay using debit or credit cards.

In practice, however, the kiosks are notoriously unreliable. Workers report that the machines routinely fail to process payments, display red error screens even when transactions have gone through, decline cards on first attempt only to accept them on a second or third swipe at

a different kiosk, and frequently fail to produce receipts.

These malfunctions have created a situation in which workers are uncertain whether a purchase has been completed, and in multiple documented cases, the payment discrepancies generated by the defective equipment have been used by Ford and Aramark as the basis for termination proceedings against employees.

A worker speaking to the World Socialist Web Site noted, “I used to buy stuff in that break room occasionally and was always alert to make sure I got the green check because I didn’t want to ever be accused of [stealing]” The worker continued, “I had heard people had been fired for stealing a bag of chips - like first offense... But I don’t really go up there anymore to buy stuff and I probably won’t ever buy stuff from up there again.”

On Reddit, a retired Ford worker wrote, “These companies steal from the workers all the time, but the minute they think you are stealing cardboard while they are dumping millions of dollars of electrical parts in the garbage they try to fire you! The hypocrisy is astounding...Hey but I did get a ‘have a \$2 drink card for the cafeteria’ after 25 years of service.”

Only after Kromm produced screenshots of his bank statement showing the \$1.95 debit card charge did Ford respond, not by reinstating him, but by demanding, through the UAW, that he obtain a notary’s signature on the documents to prove their authenticity.

Even then, it was not until June 12, more than a month after his termination, when Aramark finally confirmed the payment to Ford, that the company offered to rehire him. By then, Kromm had already moved back to Wisconsin and accepted a higher-paying job closer to home.

Ford eventually cut him a check for \$28,000 in lost wages, over 14,000 times the cost of the cookie it claimed he stole, and roughly \$5,000 short of what the UAW had told him he would receive.

KTP is the crown jewel of Ford’s global operations.

The Louisville facility, employing over 8,000 workers, builds the Super Duty pickup Ford Expedition and the Lincoln Navigator — vehicles that together generated an estimated \$25 billion in revenue in 2023 alone. The Super Duty anchors Ford’s commercial truck division, Ford Pro, which posted a staggering 12.4 percent profit margin that year, helping drive the company’s overall 2023 profits to \$10.4 billion.

Workers at KTP report that the Aramark payment kiosks have been malfunctioning for years and that the company and union are well aware of the problem. Kromm’s coworker Victoria Thomas, a 34 year Ford electrician, told Shifting Gears that the kiosk payment glitches are “well known” at the plant and have happened to her personally. “I have friends who were terminated because they bought a \$2 drink.”

Thomas described receiving bank notifications on her phone confirming a purchase while the kiosk screen simultaneously displayed an error message demanding she swipe again. “People have even tried to reach out to Aramark to say, ‘The machine took my money,’” she said.

Another coworker put the matter bluntly: “That little store should be removed if they won’t take accountability for the fact that the machines don’t work.”

Ford and the UAW have responded to these complaints with evasion. Ford spokeswoman Jessica Enoch offered a carefully worded statement acknowledging only that “there are times when we look into things and realize it could have been handled differently.”

Aramark, the \$16 billion food service contractor that operates the kiosks refused to address the malfunction issue at all, with its spokesman issuing a vacuous assurance that the company remains “focused on providing convenient, flexible snack options.”

In addition to exposing the utter ruthlessness of management the incident spotlighted the utter worthlessness of the United Auto Workers. Rather than challenge the absurdity of the accusation or raise the widely known problems with the kiosks, the union urged Kromm to apologize — to confess to a theft that never occurred — because “people go back sooner and have better luck if they’re apologetic.”

Only after Kromm fought his case on his own did the UAW belatedly inform him that Ford would change its policy from immediate termination to suspension in cases of disputed kiosk transactions — a tacit admission that the system has been destroying workers’ livelihoods on the basis of defective equipment with the union’s full

complicity.

The UAW’s refusal to defend Kurt Kromm does not represent the failure of the union apparatus, it is the apparatus functioning exactly as intended. The UAW long ago abandoned any defense of the workers it supposedly represents in favor of unlimited collaboration with management, suppressing strikes and imposing management’s dictates inside the plants. For these services it is well rewarded. It sits on a \$1.25 billion strike fund, extracted from the dues of workers it refuses to defend, while its officials collect six-figure salaries, vacation at luxury resorts, and serve as de facto personnel managers for Ford.

When Kromm was hauled into the labor office and told he was being fired for stealing a cookie, the union bargainer did not challenge the accusation, did not raise the years of documented kiosk failures, did not demand that Ford produce evidence. He told Kromm to apologize. That is the UAW’s role: not to fight the company, but to manage the workforce on the company’s behalf.

This will not change through appeals to the bureaucracy or through elections that the apparatus controls. The corporatist partnership between the UAW and the auto companies is a class alliance against the workers, part of the broader war drive of American imperialism.

Workers must take power into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the union bureaucracy. Against the authority of management and their UAW overseers workers must assert their own authority through the use of their collective strength. These rank-and-file committees must unite workers across departments, plants and industries to halt victimizations, monitor line speeds and enforce health and safety standards, including the right to refuse to work under unsafe conditions.



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