

Near unanimous vote to strike by Fiat Chrysler workers in Kokomo, Indiana

By Marcus Day
24 July 2018

Autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler's (FCA) transmission plants in the Kokomo, Indiana, area overwhelmingly approved strike action in votes Thursday and Friday last week. Workers are seeking to fight back against the deterioration of working conditions, in particular the atrocious treatment of temporary part-time (TPT) workers, which has been enabled by decades of betrayals by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

Fiat Chrysler employs nearly 7,000 at four transmission plants in the Kokomo area, which is the largest producer of transmissions in the world. Although UAW Local 685 has not officially released vote totals, Jimmy Shaw, a member of the local's executive board, commented on Facebook that "99.9" percent voted yes.

A worker at the Kokomo Transmission Plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* about the greivances motivating the strike vote. "We've been through a lot. We have hundreds of health and safety issues. We also have a plant that's all but closed, Indiana Transmission Plant II. I don't know if there's anyone that's working there now."

Referring to the extreme exploitation of TPTs, which has provoked immense opposition among young and older autoworkers throughout the industry alike, she said, "I was not really aware of it, because it's happening at a different plant, but they're forcing TPTs to work 13-14 hours.

"The whole TPT thing is outrageous in my book, that you would have temporary part-time workers paying union dues, and yet they have language in the contract saying that they don't have the same protections that a fulltime worker does. It's insulting."

Todd, a worker at the Tipton Transmission Plant near Kokomo, posted on Facebook, "Pretty much management has over 700 problems they have not

taken care of like the agreement says they have to. Also, we were supposed to get a new transmission in at ITP 2 in a year but they cancelled it and sent to China so all 1900 jobs from ITP they distributed to the other plants. Plus KTP is [phasing] out the 4 and 6 speeds so management wants to get rid of 1,900 jobs in the next 24 months. Which means anybody within their 5 years at FCA in the Kokomo/Tipton plants potentially will lose their jobs."

While workers are looking for a way to fight back against increasingly unsafe working conditions and the erosion of wages and benefits, the UAW is seeking to prevent a genuine struggle from being conducted, and instead maintain FCA's dictatorial control over the workplace. As the UAW corruption scandal has revealed, key union officials accepted over a million dollars in bribes from FCA executives in order to secure "company-friendly" agreements.

In calling the strike authorization vote, the union hopes to head off the development of a movement of workers outside their control. Rather, they are looking to conclude yet another rotten pro-corporate settlement behind closed doors, which inevitably will resolve none of the workers' concerns. Chrysler's manager of corporate communications announced last week that a meeting with the local union leadership had already been arranged.

In another comment on Facebook, Local 685 executive board member Shaw cited local president Rick Ward's comments about the vote. While saying nothing about the grievances of workers, which the unions have allowed to pile up, Ward made the absurd statement that the near unanimous strike vote would benefit the company, stating, "99.9% voted yes...not only will [we] be a stronger UNION, we will make FCA a better company."

This only underscores why workers must take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the UAW by organizing rank-and-file factory committees that are answerable to workers, not the UAW and the company. This committee should outline a list of demands and mobilize workers in Kokomo and throughout the auto industry to fight for them. The demands should include immediate elimination of the tier system, the conversion of all temporary workers to full-time, workers' control over health and safety issues, and the abolition of the Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) and restoration of overtime after 8 hours.

Kokomo workers should establish lines of communication and organize a common fight with GM, Ford and auto parts workers who all face the same conditions. A powerful movement should be built to fight in advance of the 2019 contract, where the union and companies plan to impose more concessions.

A recently retired worker from Kokomo described the attacks on working conditions sanctioned by the UAW. "The union and FCA," he said, "stuck the AWS up our ass without even a vote. There was a poll taken about two years before I retired, and it was 10 to 1 against it. But nothing was done about it. I was 10 hours on my feet and wound up having foot problems till this day. So good riddance, FCA!"

He noted his opposition to the overall growth of social inequality, adding, "The rich get richer, and they are always screwing the little guy."

The worker from Kokomo Transmission Plant denounced the claims by the UAW that the bribery scheme was limited to a few "bad actors" and that the top union officials were unaware of what was happening. She said that all of the deals that were signed between 2009 and 2015 by UAW officials implicated in the scandal should be invalidated. "Legally, they're not worth the paper they're written on."

"I came to the belief two or three months ago that there is no way that the UAW can be reformed. They're a pretty big corporation themselves. It is very difficult to find anyone who has any confidence in the UAW," she said.