

Disgraced former UAW President Gary Jones pleads guilty to corruption charges

By Tom Hall
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Gary Jones, the disgraced former president of the United Auto Workers union, pleaded guilty Wednesday afternoon to embezzlement and conspiracy charges stemming from his role in stealing more than \$1.5 million in union funds. The federal court hearing, held over video conference, was originally scheduled for March, but had been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Jones' guilty plea brings the UAW corruption scandal to a new stage. The federal investigation has increasingly tightened around the highest echelons of the UAW over the last three years. To date, 10 UAW officials have been charged, including former UAW Vice Presidents Joe Ashton and Norwood Jewell.

Jones is in a position to implicate much of the union's remaining top leadership, given both his role as union president and his previous post as head of the union's District 5, which oversaw the lavish Palm Beach getaways for union officials. Jones' predecessor, former UAW President Dennis Williams, is an unnamed co-conspirator in the complaint against Jones, according to sources cited by the *Detroit News*.

As part of the plea deal, Jones entered into a cooperation agreement with federal prosecutors. In exchange for his help in investigations against other union officials, they are recommending that he serve a maximum of 57 months in prison and have indicated that they could reduce his sentence further.

According to the indictment, Jones conspired to embezzle and then falsify expense vouchers for more than \$1 million in members' dues money spent on high-end liquor, cigars, lavish meals and endless golf junkets. His co-conspirators include Vance Pearson, Jones' successor as Region 5 Director, and Edward Robinson, another top regional official, in addition to then-president Dennis Williams.

As the noose tightened around Jones' inner circle, a 2019 wiretap obtained through the cooperation of Robinson caught Jones declaring that they should have "burned" incriminating records. Only months later, a fire ripped through Solidarity House, the union's headquarters in downtown Detroit, an event which has yet to be explained by investigators.

In a terse written response, which was not even posted on the UAW's website as of this writing, current President Rory Gamble declared the corruption scandal an "obstacle" that union members would overcome "together." Gamble repeated the absurd argument, initially made by Jones himself when he took over as head of the union in 2018, that corruption was only the product of a few bad apples and went "against everything we stand for as a union."

As with his predecessor, Gamble made this claim even as he himself is reportedly under investigation. An article in the *Detroit News* in January revealed that federal investigators are looking into the role that Gamble and former UAW-Ford Vice President Jimmy Settles may have played in a kickback scheme for union merchandising contracts, with secret payments delivered at a Detroit strip club.

The Jones guilty plea is a further nail in the coffin for claims that the UAW remains, in spite of decades of sellouts and rampant corruption, a workers' organization. It is in fact a criminal syndicate and labor contractor bought and paid for by the auto companies.

Last September, even after Jones' house was raided by the FBI, the UAW executive board voted to keep Jones as president. Jones remained in the union leadership long enough to help engineer a sellout of the nationwide General Motors strike, which paved the way for a vast expansion in the use of temps at both Ford and Fiat Chrysler. Jones was only forced out

weeks after the GM strike, with his indictment looming.

When the coronavirus pandemic was engulfing the US in March, the UAW worked hand in glove with the companies to threaten workers and keep them on the job as long as possible, a policy that has led to countless infections and the deaths of more than two dozen autoworkers. It was only after wildcat strikes and job actions broke out at plants in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Ontario, in rebellion against both management and the unions, that the companies shut down production for two months.

But the auto executives and union officials used this time to engineer a premature return to work late last month, with more than 20,000 new cases still confirmed in the United States every day, more than 10 times the rate when production stopped in mid-March.

The Jones plea increases the possibility that the government will move to exert direct control over the union using the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, in the style of the federal takeover of the Teamsters beginning in the 1980s.

Government oversight of the UAW would not lead to the “democratization” or reform of the union any more that it did for the Teamsters, which is still controlled by the Hoffa dynasty and which overruled a majority vote in 2018 in order to enforce a sellout contract at UPS. Instead, federal intervention would be aimed at shoring up the authority of the UAW under conditions where it is widely discredited and losing its ability to suppress the class struggle among autoworkers.

The fundamental character of the state as an instrument of class rule is being increasingly exposed. The same FBI and Justice Department that would engineer a takeover of the UAW are playing a pivotal role in Trump’s plans to crush the mass protests by workers and youth and establish a presidential dictatorship. Branding demonstrators as “domestic terrorists,” Trump has directed the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force to carry out arrests and imprisonments. US Attorney General William Barr, head of the Justice Department, is himself orchestrating the deployment of troops and federal agents to occupy Washington, DC.

And as the protests against the murder of George Floyd spread throughout the country last week, UAW President Gamble released a statement which made

clear the union’s support for the police. “We represent many police officers and they are truly untold heroes who go to work every day to keep all of us safe. They have bravely been on the front lines of this pandemic, as they are always on the front lines when our nation is in need. But in *this case* [emphasis added], things went terribly wrong.”

Workers were unsurprised but no less disgusted by Jones’ guilty plea. “Systemic corruption has left me with no hope that the UAW will act on the workers behalf,” a worker at Fiat Chrysler in Kokomo, Indiana told the WSWS. Saying he did not think a federal takeover would change things for the better for workers, he added, “We’re screwed either way.”

The UAW has long since proven that it is beyond reform. Now, it is up to autoworkers themselves to settle accounts with it and take their fate into their own hands.

New organizations, rank-and-file factory committees, are needed in order to establish workers’ democratic control over plant conditions and safety, to prepare the struggle against a new wave of restructuring, layoffs, and wage cuts in the auto industry, and to launch a counteroffensive against the antidemocratic and dictatorial moves of the ruling class.

To carry out a genuine and successful fight for workers’ interests, such committees must reject the pro-capitalist, nationalist orientation of the UAW and other unions, and instead take up the struggle for the international unity of workers and for the socialist reorganization of society to meet human need, not private profit.

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