

Lear auto parts workers in Missouri launch strike, disrupting production at nearby GM plant

Marcus Day
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Nearly 500 workers at the Lear auto seating manufacturing plant in Wentzville, Missouri, initiated a strike early Monday morning. Workers had voted in favor of a strike by 99.3 percent on July 15.

The walkout is the second at the plant in less than two years, with the last strike in September 2022 lasting less than 48 hours before being shut down by the United Auto Workers.

Workers at the Wentzville Lear plant, located in the St. Louis metro area, are fighting for far higher wages, along with major improvements to retirement and health benefits, hours and working conditions. Workers currently top out at approximately \$24 an hour, far below the \$42.96-an-hour wage needed to live comfortably in St. Louis, according to SmartAsset.

A recently retired worker from the plant told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*:

I've heard it's not that great to work there anymore. And I used to love my job. I had to have my shoulder replaced because of the constant repetitive work that I did there, and their doctors denied it. But I had to have it done because I couldn't work or use it. It was bone on bone. But there were people there that got both shoulders done.

The nearby General Motors Wentzville Assembly plant quickly had to suspend some of its production on

Monday morning due to the strike, with disruptions continuing Tuesday. Like other major automakers, GM relies on a "just-in-time" model of delivery for certain parts in an effort to reduce costs, making it vulnerable to supply chain disruptions.

"We are still going into work, but production is not running," a GM worker told the WSWS Tuesday. "They give us the option to leave after four hours."

On Tuesday, Lear reportedly presented UAW negotiators with a letter from GM demanding that production of seats resume.

The Southfield, Michigan-based Lear Corporation is one of the world's largest auto parts suppliers, ranking No. 10 on *Automotive News* 2024 list of top-selling parts makers and 148 on the Fortune 500 list. It produces seats and electrical systems for Ford, General Motors and other automakers.

Lear management has taken a hard line against workers' demands, despite the company reporting six consecutive quarters of increased sales and core earnings. Lear reported a record first-quarter revenue of \$6 billion this year.

"They're always making huge profits, but they don't want to trickle any of it down to the autoworkers, the people who make them the money," the retired Lear worker said. "They make million-dollar bonuses, while the people, who work for them struggle to live day to day, live over an hour away from the plant. There's no way I could afford our salary to drive back and forth to work, or buy a new car."

UAW Local 282 officials told local media that health and safety issues pose daily risks in the plant, and workers suffer from repetitive stress injuries.

In a statement, UAW Regional 4 Director Brad

Campbell said, “Shame on Lear for failing to come to a fair agreement with the 500 members of UAW Local 282 who are now forced to strike for their fair share. The company has had plenty of time to make things right, but instead spent a billion dollars on stock buybacks and dividends last year.”

There can be no doubt, however, that the UAW bureaucracy did not want the strike and will seek to isolate and shut it down as swiftly as possible, as it did in 2022. As of this writing, no announcement of the strike has been posted on the UAW’s national website, keeping the wider UAW membership in the dark about the struggle.

On the other side of Missouri, the UAW has kept workers at the Forvia (formerly Faurecia) auto parts plant in Blue Springs on the job for nearly a month following the expiration of their contract on June 28, despite a unanimous strike authorization vote in May.

The Lear strike is among the first major battles by autoworkers since the UAW’s betrayal of the 2023 Big Three autoworkers’ struggle. It also emerges amid an intensifying crisis in the administration of UAW President Shawn Fain.

In the wake of the 2023 UAW contracts at the Big Three, thousands of workers at Ford, GM and Stellantis have been laid off. Thousands of temporary workers have been fired outright, after Fain and UAW officials lied that they would all be converted to full-time employment under the new contracts.

The UAW bureaucracy has a well-documented record of selling out the struggles of Lear workers as well. At the Lear plant in Hammond, Indiana, the UAW refused to call out workers throughout the entirety of the Big Three “stand-up strikes” last year, despite an overwhelming strike authorization vote by Lear workers. In a remarkable show of courage and defiance, Lear Hammond workers voted to reject three UAW-endorsed contracts, before the union bureaucracy finally rammed through a fourth, virtually identical agreement.

Lear workers are kept fragmented in plant-by-plant contracts with different expiration dates, with no national agreement, in one of the clearest signs of the divide-and-conquer tactics used by the company and the UAW apparatus against workers.

“They don’t help everyone, and that’s about all I can say,” the Lear retiree in Wentzville said. “I had no

confidence in them at all.”

In recent weeks, Fain’s administration has been staggered by a series of revelations that it is under investigation by a court-appointed federal monitor, with both Fain and Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Mock facing competing claims of misconduct. An unnamed regional director is also under investigation by the monitor for embezzlement.

Fain’s administration is undoubtedly particularly concerned to prevent the Lear strike from expanding and galvanizing broader working class anger in the run-up to the US presidential elections, amid the intense political crisis in the US and in the Democratic Party, for whom Fain has emerged as a leading skill.

A federal court ruled against the Biden administration’s Department of Labor last month, rebuking it for refusing to properly investigate evidence of voter suppression in the 2022-23 UAW national officers’ elections which brought Fain and his “reform” caucus into office. The complaint was brought by Will Lehman, a worker at a Mack Trucks plant in Pennsylvania, who ran for UAW president on a platform of rank-and-file power in the same elections.

Lehman and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) have called for new elections in the UAW, to be overseen and controlled by workers themselves.

To prevent any sellout of their strike and imposition of concessions, Lear workers should take matters into their own hands and organize rank-and-file strike committees. These committees would provide a means for workers to draw up a list of their own demands based on what workers actually need, such as a 50 percent wage increase, an end to mandatory weekend overtime, and workers’ oversight of health and safety issues.

At the same time, an appeal should be made to workers at GM Wentzville, Forvia and other plants for a coordinated struggle against job cuts and for higher wages.



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