

# UAW leaving Kokomo workers in limbo as Stellantis-StarPlus Energy lease deal finalized at battery plant

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Details emerging about the deal between Stellantis and the StarPlus Energy battery joint venture in Kokomo, Indiana with South Korean Samsung SDI highlight the way the United Auto Workers functions as a labor contractor instead of a genuine workers organization.

Starting January 26, Stellantis Kokomo workers sent to StarPlus will be leased workers “represented” by the UAW.

According to a letter sent out earlier this month by StarPlus Energy management, “All hourly employees of StarPlus Energy will be separated. Concurrently all employees will be offered full-time employment by Stellantis, which will then lease your services back to StarPlus Energy under our new employment arrangement.”

Under terms of this deal, the UAW bureaucracy has agreed to supply a captive labor force for the battery operation in exchange for the right to collect dues from the workers. As of this writing, Stellantis workers in Kokomo, except for some from Kokomo Casting and Kokomo Transmission Plant, have been given an option to work at the battery plant as leased workers

According to reports by Stellantis Kokomo workers, the UAW is continuing to hold recruitment meetings to push laid off Stellantis workers into StarPlus. Members of the Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee report that UAW officials are giving workers an ultimatum, telling them they either accept work at StarPlus as leased employees or lose their jobs permanently. This could also mean losing state unemployment benefits and SUB pay (supplemental unemployment benefits) for refusing to accept an available job.

At no point has the UAW stated what UAW-represented StarPlus workers will be paid or if they will keep their present seniority and pay under terms of the 2023 UAW-Stellantis national contract agreement.

According to some reports, StarPlus workers earn as little as \$19 an hour, far less than UAW members employed at Stellantis plants.

In a statement reporting the lease deal with Stellantis in Kokomo, Fain claimed that 1,000 new jobs would be created at the battery plant for UAW members. In the same statement Fain presented the recent resignation of Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares as a victory for the UAW members, claiming Stellantis was “trying to cut its way out of its own mismanagement.” In reality, Tavares’ termination has been used to facilitate the UAW

bureaucracy’s collaboration with the auto company.

However, it is not clear what the fate of leased workers at StarPlus would be if Stellantis decided for whatever reason to pull out of the StarPlus joint venture if, for example, the incoming Trump administration were to revoke federal subsidies for the EV transition. The lease deal in Kokomo follows the announcement by GM that it is pulling out of the Ultium Cells battery plant in Lansing, Michigan, putting a question mark over the entire project, which GM had claimed would create 1,700 jobs.

As one member of the Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee stated, “When things are unknown it means it’s always a sellout,” referring to the UAW’s earlier promise that temporary part time and supplemental workers at Stellantis would be hired as full time after the signing of the 2023 contract. In reality, they were fired within months.

During the 2023 contract negotiations, Fain and President Biden talked about a “just transition” to EV production. This did not mean defending the jobs and pay scales of UAW members. Instead, it meant ensuring that the UAW bureaucracy got the franchise inside the battery plants and other EV production facilities. In exchange for the flow of dues money from these highly exploited workers, the UAW apparatus ensured the corporations and the government that the EV plants would be operated under sweetheart contracts containing substandard pay and benefits.

For example, the UAW signed a secret deal to unionize EV company Rivian based on the company achieving profitability. The company, which has not posted a quarterly profit since its founding in 2009, is now receiving a \$6.6 billion loan from the US Department of Energy for a new plant in Georgia.

The deal to unionize Rivian was done without any consultation nor vote by workers. Like their brothers and sisters at the Big Three automakers, Rivian workers labor long hours under unsafe conditions without stable jobs and adequate benefits.

The claim that StarPlus will bring close to 1,000 jobs to Kokomo is misleading. Hundreds of jobs were cut with the sale of the nearby Stellantis Tipton Transmission plant. On top of that, 387 SE’s were fired at the beginning of 2024 at Stellantis plants in Kokomo.

In a cynical letter announcing the lease deal Region 2B Director David Green said workers should “be excited and celebrate.” He

claimed that Stellantis workers at StarPlus will have “a good UAW job and enjoy the benefits they deserve.”

Workers will recall that Green oversaw the handing of concessions to GM to supposedly “save” the Lordstown plant, which was shuttered in 2019 with the agreement of the UAW.

Later, after being given a job as head of Region 2B, Green helped ram through concessions at Allison Transmission, trampling on a 95 percent contract rejection and a 99 percent strike authorization vote.

In early 2023, Green oversaw the sellout of Clarios battery workers in Toledo, Ohio. The deplorable conditions at Clarios provide insight into the conditions the UAW will preside over at EV battery plants, including low pay, multiple tiers and the handling of carcinogenic materials without proper safeguards resulting in lowered life expectancy. As part of the contract deal imposed by the UAW after shutting down the Clarios workers’ courageous 40-day strike, the UAW agreed to 12-hour shifts without the payment of overtime after 8 hours.

A StarPlus worker stated, “They recruited us but presented things differently than what is actually happening there. It’s a very unsafe environment with multiple OSHA violations.”

Another anonymous StarPlus worker who contacted the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* described the conditions inside the battery plant. “There is no breakroom, no assurances of the impact of union transfers, no eyewash stations, exit doors were taped and blocked off, and lack of sustained training for workers.” This worker continued, “The machine cuts the anode and cathode pieces and then stacks them. They had to wear clean suits and cleanroom shoes. It has 3 percent humidity in that area. The floors are stainless steel, too, so, any electricity hits it will cook some people too.

“There was a fire scare, and the only alarm was a man in a clean room suit running through the plastic out of the cleanroom, yelling fire...On the fire evacuation, they couldn’t figure out why nobody pulled a fire alarm.”

Before starting the job, the worker said, “There was a full week of orientation. Engineers came in and explained what the machines did in that department. And then each administration department, like finance, procurement, safety...” This worker described how the company kept the description of the chemicals and the risks very vague.

According to the worker, “the cathode is on aluminum and the anode is on copper, sitting on slurry of cobalt, lithium and nickel.” He noted, “There is a huge cancer risk with nickel, cobalt, and lithium. They test other international battery plants for nickel in workers’ blood. This is what I was told. We signed a lot of paperwork for this. Honestly, it worried me that a large percentage of my hiring group had no idea about this. The community is not educated on what to do if this place burns too. It could be a catastrophe.”

As the WSWS warned in 2021 concerning the transition to EV production, the aim was not primarily to protect the environment, but to cut costs and increase profits. This was particularly critical in American capitalism’s economic and military confrontation with China, which dominates the EV market and the processing of raw materials for the batteries.

“As with all significant technological advances under capitalism,” the WSWS wrote, “the shift to EVs, along with the developments in artificial intelligence and autonomous vehicles, are not being directed at the betterment of society or the improvement of working conditions, but rather are being used to intensify the exploitation of the working class.”

Over the last 50 years, the UAW has been transformed from a defensive workers’ organization into a vehicle for the defense of the income and perks of the well-heeled UAW bureaucracy.

The defense of jobs, health and safety cannot be left in the hands of the corporatist union bureaucracy. The Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee in alliance with their brothers and sisters in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), issued the following statement at a recent meeting:

We are not alone in losing our jobs. 35,000 of our brothers and sisters at Volkswagen in Germany are losing their jobs as well. Like the UAW bureaucracy here, their union, IG Metall, gave the company their blessings. Just like here they said that no plant will be closed. They don’t say anything about loss of benefits for thousands of workers losing their jobs.

All the same attempts of reforming the union with the UAWD and others is a way to push us back to the bureaucracy, while they wash their hands from betrayals. We saw what happened to Delphi. Throughout the Midwest workers at Delphi had their wages, retirement and healthcare benefits gutted. They were the test case for the automakers on how to cut costs to boost profits. Spinning off from GM, then lowering the wages of these workers is what Stellantis is doing with us in the battery plants.

Lithium, cobalt, nickel and other elements that go into these batteries are in countries like Ukraine and Russia. The US is at war for resources. We don’t want to fight our brothers in sisters in Russia, China or anywhere else. We need our own independent organization to share information. The UAW supports the government and the wars abroad while telling us nothing! There’s only a few of them cockroaches and we outnumber them!

Workers from Kokomo Transmission, Indiana Transmission, Kokomo Casting and the StarPlus plants and autoworkers more broadly, join us to defend our right to a job!

For more information about joining the Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



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