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Covid-19 pandemic and the workforce

# Travis Watkins: Fighting General Motors Amid the COVID Pandemic

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**Travis Watkins was and hopefully will be again a mechanic at a General Motors plant in Wyoming, Michigan. He was recently fired for warning his fellow workers that two other workers were suspected of having the Coronavirus and had been removed from the factory. Watkins was employed by Caravan Facility Management, on contract to GM for plant maintenance. The 30 some unit workers were a mix of plant cleaners and skilled trades workers. The Caravan group was one of the units in the plant organized by Local 167 of the United Auto Workers. The unit elected Travis Watkins as their representative to the Local's E-Board and bargaining committee.**

**Travis, tell us what happened.**

On March 16th, I received a few phone calls from inside the plant. Some workers were telling me that a couple of members had been driven out on a medical cart by security wearing facemasks and that they were being removed from the plant for suspected Covid-19 symptoms. I reached out to my local leadership to try to organize to protect us all. I did not hear back from our local leadership and the very next morning when I came in to work, I was told by a supervisor that I was immediately being put on suspension pending an investigation. When I inquired as to what the suspension was for, he said he didn't know. I had him call labor management at my company, Caravan, and they weren't able to provide me with any information.

The following day, I was called to a meeting with plant management; I had an international representative with me. I was told I was being terminated. As the reason, they quoted a Shop Rule Violation 2, which is assaulting, fighting, threatening, coercing or interference with employees or management. And they provided a Facebook post that I had made inside of a private Facebook group that deals with on-the-job site conditions and union member concerns. All the post said was it had been reported to me that some people had been walked out of GM with suspected Covid-19 symptoms and I had reported it to local leadership. That was the reason they used to terminate me.

**In your discussions with both union leadership and GM, to the extent you could talk to them, you raised health and safety concerns.**

Yes. On March 16th, I saw a General Motors high level manager passing out bottles of cleaner to a worker in the bargaining unit I represented and also to a worker in the GM bargaining unit. And I stopped him and asked him what was going on and what they were doing. And he said, well, we're beginning some cleanup of work station areas to disinfect for Covid-19.

And I noticed there was no personal protection equipment, that these employees hadn't been trained on the proper ways to mitigate and clean up for Covid-19. And I said, you know, unless you guys can provide the proper protective equipment as listed by CDC or OSHA, like facemasks and gloves and in some cases hazmat suits and so forth to do this cleanup, we weren't going to do it and it was a health and safety issue and he needed to address that. He got frustrated and angry because he had to stop what he was doing. But, again, the following morning, I was terminated.

**You've been really active in the union, co-founding United Auto Workers for Democracy, you have been elected to the local's executive board, and you were thinking of running for president. It seems pretty likely that someone in the union, someone not interested in having you challenging local leadership gave management the information about your Facebook page post.**

That absolutely did happen in my case. It was reported to me and verified from another very good source. And when GM recently answered a formal whistleblower complaint I made, they acknowledged that the Facebook post had come from the President of our Local. He was complicit with them to initiate my termination. That is a fact.

### **One thing puzzles me. Why is GM so insistent on keeping the factory operating when demand is going down and they have a stockpile of new cars ready for sale?**

First they are only reopening one of the three shifts. Before COVID, since the September-October 40 day strike, the plant was operating 24 hours a day 6 days a week, and for some continuously for weeks, paying lots of overtime. They were pumping out product. Today's reopening is just partial. Second, even in just-in-time production, they try to keep a considerable supply of parts because they want to be able to weather a strike. Even the recent UAW national 40 day strike seemed to me not a serious strike, called to let workers blow off steam. If you want to threaten GM nowadays, you have to prepare for a long, long strike.

### **Let's switch gears. How did workers feel about being forced to work during the pandemic?**

People are fearful of getting the virus. But they don't want to lose their jobs. As you may know, the companies and the international union have set up another joint task force with this health and safety issue. It's a lot of people's belief that this has left members at risk. Instead of the international union addressing issues on a local level—providing information, education and support, health and safety in the plants—they again partnered with the company in this joint task force and it just delayed shutting down these plants. Which were only closed when the governor ordered a full shut down of non-essential work. Now the joint task force is working on an agreement about reopening the plant, and not conferring with local leadership. And they are not using any leadership at the local level to address the issue. It seems to me and many other members that they're putting the company first—mitigating the company's loss of profits by compromising the health and safety of workers.

So, people are afraid. They don't want to lose their job. They're afraid to speak out for the reasons that I find myself in now. But as a local leader, that's my responsibility to stand up for the membership and to make sure that they're safe on the job. That's just what we're trained to do; that's what we're supposed to do; and it's the right thing to do.

### **How are you fighting to reverse your firing?**

My grievance has now moved to the 3rd Step. It now takes the grievance process out of local representatives' hands and moves it into the hands of my International (UAW) Regional Servicing Rep. Dan Kosheba (UAW Region 1-D) and my company's (Caravan?Facility Management) operation manager Mark Stillman. My opinion?is that the company, rather than admit any wrong doing, will stall this process and force this issue in front of a referee at arbitration. This process is known to take quite some time.

I have also filed NLRB charges against the company for three separate?violations. In my opinion, the?grievance process cannot be handled appropriately or with proper representation due to the company refusing my?representative's legal request for information. If the NLRB agrees, instead of deferring my case until the grievance process is handled, which is normal protocol, they may be able to take my case earlier.

In addition to the NLRB charge, I also filed a whistle blower?complaint with OSHA and Caravan answered. Besides acknowledging that the Local President has given them my private Facebook post to union members, Caravan's answer just used boilerplate language to the effect that the termination was proper and had nothing to do with my effort to warn fellow workers.

### **What kind of support are you getting from other union members?**

On the day of my termination the 30 some workers in my unit sent a petition to Caravan to have me reinstated. On May Day UAW members and labor activists held a peaceful and safe protest at the GM factory in Wyoming MI. The protest took place with a car caravan around the facility with signage and horns going. I was humbled to see so many people, many of them UAW retirees, coming together in solidarity to protest my unjust discharge. I should note that Local 167 took no part in the protest and Local 167 President Willie Holmes denied many requests to gather in the hall parking lot as a place to meet before the protest. This was not for any safety related issues (again, no one left their vehicles), but because they did not agree to protest. Finally, Frank Hammer, a former UAW local president and bargaining chair and IUAW rep has started a change.org petition to demand my reinstatement. It currently has about 1500 signatures.

### **How are GM and Caravan doing about safety issues in order to re-open?**

Businessmen everywhere are pushing for early reopening and Michigan's Governor Whitmer is complying. While extending Michigan's stay at home order to May 28th and implementing testing and tracking programs, she has allowed manufactures including the big 3 automakers to open on May 18th with an understanding that the manufacturers will meet high standards of health and safety.

The plants have made some health and safety changes, not enough in my opinion. In fact I have yet to see a "set" protocol in "Black and White" from either the International or the companies. There was an initial push to return workers on May 4th, but as you know that's been pushed back because these plants were not ready and the health and safety of our citizens in this COVID-19 crisis did not make this date viable or reasonable.

While the tentative date for the return of the day shift is May 18th, the workers in my unit were called in to work on May 11th to do disinfecting as well as install hand sanitizers. I am told the companies will be providing 2 face masks per day as well as gloves, will require social distancing and allow time for clean up between shifts. But no one will be tested for COVID. Instead, workers entering the plant will be thermal scanned for high temperatures which is ineffective in my opinion because a great deal of COVID-19 carriers are asymptomatic. And they will be given a questionnaire. This appears to me as a way of forcing workers to answer yes to all the questions, and many of the questions seem designed to give GM grounds for contesting legal liability, if the worker gets COVID. All decisions as to required health and safety provision are still being made by the UAW-Company "safety task force".

I'm worried, obviously, there's pressure to get the economy running, but worker health and safety must take precedence over profit. Many experts agree that opening the economy now risks devastating consequences in this crisis.

### **Travis, you have a GoFundMe campaign going. Tell us about it.**

Right. I started a GoFundMe page because myself and my family are "obviously" with this attack from the company on my livelihood "I'm now without employment. And I have not yet been able to get unemployment benefits. Because the company terminated me, I had to file under misconduct which subjects me to additional delays and loopholes to get my claim settled. As of today, I have yet to receive any determination or money from unemployment and my family is still without income or health insurance.

Also, I have high prescription costs for my family. They have "some of my children have medical needs, and I'm without insurance. So, that's the reason I started a GoFundMe page—to kind of get caught up on some bills and some of these prescription costs that I have for my family. And I've had some great contributions, people have been very

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generous, and I very much appreciate it and my family appreciates it very much.

**Travis, thanks for talking and your work. As we discussed in preparing for the interview, if GM/Caravan manages to get away with firing you, then others in the plant will hesitate to report health and safety violations. Keep up the struggle.**

Thanks, Bill. I really appreciate the time and the interest that you've taken and giving me the opportunity to speak out on this health and safety issue to keep the membership safe.

*This interview is an edited version of an interview of Travis Watkins by Bill Resnick of [The Old Mole Variety Hour on KBOO radio, 90.7fm Portland, OR](#). Republished from [Solidarity](#).*

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