

Union betrayal at Navistar— A warning to Canadian auto workers

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The very week that the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) began contract talks with the three major North American automakers, it wound up the struggle against union-busting at Navistar.

The 650 production workers at Navistar's heavy truck assembly plant in Chatham ratified a new contract by a margin of 82 percent on July 15, ending an explosive six-week strike that had galvanized support from workers across southwestern Ontario. Then, in the subsequent three days, CAW President Buzz Hargrove and other senior union officials met respectively with the management of General Motors', Ford's and DaimlerChrysler's Canadian divisions.

That the CAW leadership is proclaiming the two-year contract it negotiated with Navistar a "victory" must serve as a warning to all auto workers. The agreement provides the framework for Navistar to speed up production, while continuing to slash jobs.

Prior to the strike, the Chatham plant was producing 39 heavy trucks a day. Now, thanks to changes in contract provisions governing scheduling and work rules, the plant's present workforce will produce 46 trucks per day, with a potential, under mandatory overtime, of up to 57 per day. The contract compels workers to work 48 hours per week, including 5 hours on Saturdays, when management demands.

The contract further gives Navistar a green light to contract out as many as 43 more jobs. And, as a lever for pressing for further concessions, the world's fourth-largest truck maker retains its threat to close the plant. A contractual guarantee the Chatham plant will remain open lapses after May 31, 2003.

Especially significant and damaging to working class solidarity is the CAW's abandonment of the more than 1,000 Navistar workers currently on layoff. As company spokesman Roy Wiley was quick to point out, the new contract will enable Navistar to boost production without

having to call back a single worker. It is precisely such betrayals which have helped create the political climate in which employers believe that they can successfully resort to strikebreaking.

The settlement at Navistar is in keeping with the concessionary and corporatist agreements negotiated by the unions over the past two decades. It serves not the class interests of the workers, but those of the parasitic union bureaucracy that sits atop the unions and seeks to secure its privileges by serving as a tool of big business in containing discontent on the shop floor and, above all, suppressing any broader class struggle.

Workers should be under no illusion: The CAW leadership will now ruthlessly enforce the dictates of Navistar management in a bid to convince it that it need not do away with the union. The CAW's bargaining report to the Local 127 membership boasted, "we are their lowest cost producers and have the lowest HPU's (hours per unit) of all International Truck [Navistar] facilities. We believe we have a long and viable future."

But the significance of the Navistar betrayal goes far beyond Chatham. It once again illustrates that the big business offensive against the working class has only been possible because the unions and the social-democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party have repeatedly intervened to contain and derail working class opposition.

Navistar's attempt to make use of the provincial Tory government's abolition of the ban on the use of strike-breakers and hire scabs provoked mass opposition in the automaking centers of southern Ontario. As Hargrove himself admitted, his difficulty was not in convincing CAW members to come to Chatham but to keep them on the job.

Then on June 24, six members of the CAW from DaimlerChrysler in Windsor were injured, when a thug employed by a firm of professional strike-breakers,

London Protection Services, deliberately drove a van into a picket line at a staging area for the union-busting operation.

Lost in the reports of the settlement is the fact that 37 year-old skilled tradesman Don Milner lies critically injured in a London hospital. According to the most up-to-date information the WSWS could obtain from the CAW, Milner remains in a coma, with multiple injuries including kidney failure.

With the picket-line confrontation pointing to both the need and possibility for a mass industrial and political mobilization against Navistar and the provincial Tory government, the CAW leadership stepped into isolate and smother the Navistar struggle. Navistar's announcement it was temporarily suspending its efforts to bring in scabs was immediately invoked by the CAW to call off mass picketing. More importantly, the CAW leadership then appealed to the Tories and the Big Three to assist it in convincing Navistar to return to the bargaining table.

Ultimately, these appeals would succeed. The union bureaucracy, Canada's most right-wing government, and the most powerful sections of big business all recognized they had a common interest in defusing the crisis, so as to prevent the eruption of a broader struggle that could potentially menace capitalist interests as a whole.

Thus when Hargrove spoke before a mass rally of striking Toronto municipal workers—a strike like that at Navistar, which was provoked by changes made by the Tory provincial government—the president of the CAW dared not even mention the ongoing Navistar strike.

As for Navistar, it seriously considered proceeding with the strikebreaking campaign, even when the police said lives would probably be lost. The *Chatham Daily News* obtained minutes of a meeting between company representatives and local and Ontario Provincial Police. When told that the police could not guarantee order if the scabbing operation resumed, an official from the company's Chicago head office asked if the National Guard could not be deployed. According to the minutes, Navistar was “told Canada does not have National Guard units, and that the only recourse to handle a breach of the peace of the expected magnitude would be government intervention through a military deployment, and that any such deployment would require the approval of the Prime Minister of Canada.”

With the political establishment and the Big Three counselling against a resumption of the strikebreaking effort—Ford sent a letter explicitly commending the CAW as a partner—Navistar ultimately chose to rely on the union

bureaucracy to ensure its profitability. One further factor appears to account for the company's readiness to withdraw many of its concessions demands in favour of a quick settlement. The imminent introduction of costly new environmental standards on new US trucks has led to a mini-boom in truck sales.

Needless to say, both the CAW leadership and the Big Three were eager to have the Navistar dispute settled before the opening of negotiations that both sides have said will be difficult. Citing excess capacity and increasing Asian competition, each of the three automakers' Canadian subsidiaries has announced a pending assembly plant closure.

The CAW leadership's response to the deepening crisis in the auto industry has been to deepen its collaboration with the Big Three. Recently it joined a new federal government task force on the future of the auto industry. It is lobbying Ottawa to make tax concessions to the Big Three and urging Ontario's Tory government to offer them outright grants to secure new investment. Last but not least, the CAW is directly appealing to the automakers to recognize the competitive advantage their Canadian operations enjoy over those in the US due to the lower value of the Canadian dollar and Canada's state-funded health care scheme, Medicare.

Such a course can only mean deepening collaboration with the automakers in imposing plant closures, speed-up and wage and benefit cuts.

The defence of auto workers' jobs, wages and rights, as those of the entire working class, necessitates a break from the nationalist-corporatist policy of the CAW, which subordinates workers' needs to the profits of big business and pits workers against each other on national lines in a fratricidal struggle for jobs and investment. Auto workers in Canada must join forces with those in the US, Mexico and internationally in making a socialist internationalist program the axis of their struggles.



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