

Large UAW local votes 80 percent to reject

Chrysler sellout faces strong rank-and-file opposition

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20 October 2007

As voting begins on a new four-year contract between the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Chrysler, there is evidence of powerful rank-and-file opposition to the deal, which gives private equity firm Cerberus Capital a free hand to carve up the company and wipe out thousands of jobs.

On Thursday, workers at the St. Louis North Assembly plant rejected the contract by an 80 percent margin. The plant, which employs 2,330 workers, is Chrysler's third largest. Chrysler employs 49,000 UAW-represented workers.

The strong "no" vote on the first day of balloting is significant. It is well known that the UAW bureaucracy attempts to line up plants to vote first where it thinks it has the strongest margin of support. The St. Louis North Assembly plant is scheduled to launch the newly designed Dodge Ram in 2009, one of only a handful of plants that are promised a new product under terms of the tentative agreement. Its sister facility, the St. Louis South Assembly plant, is threatened with closure. The UAW probably calculated this would incline workers at the North plant to approve the deal. In this case, they miscalculated.

At another smaller Chrysler facility, the Kenosha, Wisconsin, engine plant, workers voted Thursday to approve the contract. The factory has been promised Chrysler's new Phoenix V-6 engine.

The contract, patterned after the agreement with General Motors, sanctions the destruction of virtually all of the gains made by the UAW since the 1930s. It eliminates company-paid retiree health benefits and in its place establishes a multibillion-dollar Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association (VEBA) under the control of the UAW bureaucracy. The VEBA, which is grossly underfunded and cannot sustain existing benefit levels for retirees, will nonetheless provide the UAW with a huge new source of income.

In exchange, the UAW has agreed to massive concessions, including the imposition of a two-tier wage system that will slash the pay of new hires to just \$14 an hour, a pay freeze for current workers, the scrapping of defined benefit pensions for new workers and major work rule changes.

Chrysler gave no commitment to continue operating virtually

any of its 26 facilities after the 2011 contract expiration. While the UAW claims that Chrysler agreed to a moratorium on plant closures and outsourcing similar to the GM agreement, these promises are worthless. This is underscored by the announcement this week that GM plans to eliminate shifts at both its Pontiac and Detroit/Hamtramck assembly plants.

Faced with the real possibility that the rank-and-file will reject this betrayal, a number of UAW local officials have publicly opposed it.

The UAW bureaucracy is mobilizing all its resources to browbeat workers into approving the sellout, with UAW President Ron Gettelfinger and UAW Vice President General Holiefield contacting local officials in an attempt to shore up support for the sellout. Indicating the level of concern, a report in the October 19 *Wall Street Journal* cited a UAW official who called the level of lobbying by UAW officials "unusual" and greater than in previous contracts.

Gettelfinger and Holiefield went to Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit Thursday to campaign for the contract. The UAW officials reportedly warned workers that if the contract failed, the plant would lose its second shift early next year.

On Friday, Holiefield was scheduled to visit the Newark Delaware assembly plant to pressure workers to ratify. The Newark plant is set to close in 2009. There were conflicting reports over when the contract vote would be held, with some sources saying Friday and others claiming it would be held off until Sunday.

One indication of the mounting hostility to the UAW bureaucracy were comments posted on the *Wilmington News Journal's* website commenting on Holiefield's visit to the Newark plant. One worker wrote, "I sure hope Holiefield doesn't plan showing up to our union hall the day we vote. He is sure to be in for a rude awakening. They must think we are blind and stupid, but we are going to show them otherwise!"

Opposition to the contract appears to have disrupted the UAW bureaucracy's plans to wrap up ratification this weekend. Voting is now set to continue through at least Wednesday.

On Friday, workers at the St Louis South Assembly Plant

attended a ratification meeting on the contract. Tim Kaminski, a retired worker and former UAW committeeman from Chrysler's Fenton (South) plant, near St. Louis, provided the WSWs with the following account.

"Local 136 at Fenton (North) voted it down by 80 percent. If the ratification meeting is any indication, the sentiment to reject the contract here is overwhelming, too. The meeting was packed, and the International tried to defend the agreement with workers asking one question after another.

"James Coakley [the Administrative Assistant to Vice President, Director Chrysler Department UAW, General Holiefield] was there from the International. He tried to soft-sell the contract, telling workers they had nothing to worry about. Outside of the International, I didn't hear any favorable comments about the contract. Even the local leadership didn't want to come out in support of it.

"The main questions were about the core and non-core jobs, which will pay half as much. The International didn't want to give any straight answers. All they would say is you'll be safe on the off-the-line jobs; you don't have to worry until you retire.

"Workers asked which jobs were going to be core and which ones would be non-core. The International representative said that would be determined later by a committee set up by the union and the company. A worker said, 'I don't trust you and the company deciding.'

"The best comment I heard was from a worker who said, 'You are taking us back to the 1960s. There are no concessions from the company. Everything is coming from us.'

"The overwhelming sentiment is to vote this down. The trick is to get out the vote and make sure they don't mess with the counting of the votes. We don't trust the International.

"The union officials knew that they were outnumbered. You could see that Coakley lacked confidence. He out-and-out lied, saying Chrysler wasn't going to close the plant; you have a future product. But how does he know? He did admit that the company was going to cut out the second shift in January.

"Workers look at Cerberus as a company that is only interested in stripping and flipping the company. They are only out to eliminate jobs and do mayhem.

"The membership doesn't trust the union with our retiree benefits. Look what happened with the VEBA at Caterpillar and Detroit Diesel. A lot of us think the union officials are crooks anyway."

Another 8,000 Chrysler workers voted Friday, including 1,530 at the Detroit Axle plant, members of UAW local 961.

SEP supporters went to the Detroit Axle ratification vote Friday and distributed a leaflet calling for rejection of the sellout. The plant is scheduled to close, with a portion of the work being transferred to a new facility in Marysville, Michigan, that will only employ 900. Under terms of the tentative agreement, Detroit Axle has been designated a "Non-Core Facility," meaning that Chrysler can bring in new hires at

a starting wage of as low as \$14 an hour to fill all vacant positions.

The nervousness of the UAW bureaucracy was indicated by the reaction of local officials to the SEP leaflet. They threatened to call the police, ordering SEP supporters to move 100 feet from the entrance to the union hall, which is located on a public sidewalk.

Despite this provocation, SEP supporters received a warm response to the leaflet. One worker took the leaflet and said, "I am voting no anyway. I am tired of getting laid off. I have been laid off since last year more than 30 times. I have lost my house and everything."

After listening to a SEP supporter explain the implications of the contract, a worker said, "Are you telling me we are going to make history twice? In other words we are going backwards."

Workers expressed anger that the UAW bureaucracy had attempted to prevent distribution of the leaflet opposing the contract. "They pushed it on us in 2003," one worker bitterly recalled. "No matter how you vote, they are going to push it through.

"I have a lot to say. I am already displaced from my plant in Huntsville, Alabama, in 2003. When they sold it in 2004, I came up here. I need 11 more years to retire."

Autoworkers should organize rank-and-file committees to campaign for a rejection of the agreement and monitor the ratification vote to prevent the UAW bureaucracy from intimidating opponents of the contract and manipulating the vote tally.

Rejection of the contract is only the first step. The contract fight must be taken out of the hands of the UAW and a struggle launched to defend workers' jobs, living standards and working conditions. A national auto strike should be launched and a campaign begun to bring out GM, Ford, Delphi, Visteon and other workers, together with an appeal to autoworkers in Canada, Latin America, Asia and Europe who are facing attacks by the same global auto giants.

The defense of workers' conditions and rights must be developed on an entirely new basis. This means, above all, the building of a new political movement of the working class, independent of the two parties of big business, to fight for a program that starts from the needs of working people, not the profits and stock portfolios of CEOs and Wall Street speculators.



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