

As contract faces rejection

UAW conspires with Chrysler to impose agreement

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The United Auto Workers union is engaged in a war against its membership, colluding with management at Chrysler LLC to impose a new labor agreement, which a majority of Chrysler workers oppose.

The deal would pave the way for Chrysler's Wall Street owners—private equity firm Cerberus Capital Management—to shut down and sell off dozens of factories, slash the wages of future workers by half and abolish employer-paid pensions and retiree health care benefits. In return the UAW bureaucracy would gain control of a multi-billion trust fund, estimated to be worth over \$70 billion once deals are sealed with all three of Detroit's automakers.

This betrayal has provoked an upsurge of opposition from rank-and-file workers. A majority of Chrysler workers who have voted thus far, including those at four large assembly plants in St. Louis, Detroit and Newark, Delaware, have rejected the deal. If the opposition continues at this rate in votes scheduled this week at assembly plants in Sterling Heights and Warren, Michigan, as well as Belvidere, Illinois, the contract will be defeated. This would mark the first rejection of a national auto agreement since 1982.

While threats have been leaked to the press that Cerberus might respond to a rejection of the contract by locking out its 49,000 workers and hiring replacements, at this point it is much more likely that the private equity firm will rely on the UAW bureaucracy to push through its demands.

Citing "people close to the situation," an article in the *Detroit News* reported, "[I]f the pact isn't ratified in the end but the vote is close, Chrysler appears likely to ask the UAW to take a revote, rather than to directly return to the bargaining table. Those at Chrysler apparently see a defeat as the 'union's problem' that must be resolved by the union."

It is increasingly becoming clear that the UAW bureaucracy has no intention to let the will of its members decide the matter. The UAW has responded with a campaign of blackmail, lies and intimidation to push through a 'yes' vote.

Based on information from union insiders, the *New York Times* reported on October 20, "If the contract seems headed to defeat, the union could suspend the voting and go on to Ford in

hopes of reaching an agreement there."

Richard Block, acting director at the Michigan State University School of Labor and Industrial Relations, also suggested to the *Detroit News* that the union leadership, facing widespread opposition and lacking a quick fix that would satisfy the members, could choose to move on to negotiations with Ford Motor Co. "They could go on to Ford and get that done because it may help with Chrysler workers—give them more guidance as to what the pattern is," Block said.

In other words, the UAW could simply ignore the decision of its members and isolate the Chrysler workers from GM and Ford workers in order to ram through the concession contract.

Another option for the union, in the event that the membership turns the contract down, is to make the workers vote until they get it "right." Citing Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove, who they called a "seasoned bargainer," the *Detroit Free Press* said, the UAW could "wait a bit" and have another vote.

Given the history of the UAW bureaucracy, workers should also be on guard against efforts to manipulate the results of the ratification vote, particularly since several locals have refused to make public how many of their members voted or by what percentage the contract was approved or rejected.

The conspiracy to ram through Chrysler's demands began even before the tentative agreement was reached. Initially, the nine-member UAW National Negotiating Committee unanimously opposed the outlines of the agreement drawn up by UAW President Ronald Gettelfinger and the International union. According to Shawn Fain, a member of the bargaining committee at UAW Local 1166 in Kokomo, Indiana, the International union repeated the vote three more times, until only one opponent of the deal remained, Bill Parker, the Chairman of the Negotiating Committee.

Then on October 15, during a meeting of the Chrysler Council—made up of presidents and committee persons from each of Chrysler's local unions—the International rejected a motion for a roll call and pushed through a voice vote. Shain noted that this "was a total sham, due to the fact that there was no way to get an accurate count of those voting in favor or

opposed and the fact that there are numerous people in the council meeting who have no voice yet they yell out their vote anyway.”

Gettelfinger announced the deal had won “overwhelming support”—although witnesses said a third or more of the delegates opposed it—adding, “We give people an opportunity to express themselves. We’re a very democratic union.”

After a series of large locals voted down the contract, UAW Vice President General Holiefield sent out a letter to appointed union officials demanding they return it with a signature pledging their support for the agreement. The letter was a thinly veiled threat that these appointed officials would lose their high salaries and be sent back to assembly line if they failed to back the agreement.

With opposition growing, Gettelfinger and Holiefield traveled to the Jefferson North Assembly plant in Detroit last week, where they announced that second shift workers being laid off would not return to their jobs if the contract was not passed. Nevertheless, 60 percent of the workers turned down the deal.

On Monday, Holiefield held a meeting with 60 representatives from Local 1700—which represents workers at the Sterling Heights Assembly plant who are voting Wednesday—in an effort to circumvent the president of the local, Parker.

Holiefield announced a “previously undisclosed understanding” between the UAW and Chrysler that supposedly guaranteed production at the plant and other US factories well beyond the 2011 expiration of a proposed contract if the deal was approved, according to unnamed union officials who spoke to Reuters.

“It sounds to me like they’re making one more push for the deal, to get it ratified,” Erich Merkle, analyst at IRN Inc., told the newspaper. “I guess it comes down to whether the member base of the UAW trusts the leadership in terms of these handshake-type deals.”

At the Belvidere Assembly plant, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, “union leaders will have some new carrots to offer the rank and file. Chrysler has told UAW leaders it will give preference to the temporary workers when it hires for permanent jobs, said a person familiar with the matter.”

It is urgent that workers take matters into their own hands by organizing rank-and-file committees to oppose these efforts to stifle opposition. These committees should monitor the vote and fight for the launching of a national strike against Chrysler. The struggle should be spread to workers at GM, Ford, Delphi and other industries, and an appeal made to auto workers in Canada, Mexico, Europe and Asia who are facing attacks on their jobs and living standards. Such a struggle is only possible if it is waged independently of the UAW.

No confidence should be placed in Parker and other professional dissidents in the UAW who are currently opposing the deal. They would be more than willing to back a renegotiated offer if it included certain cosmetic changes, such

as the so-called job commitments contained in the UAW-General Motors contract.

That such guarantees are worthless was proven immediately after the GM contract was ratified, when the company announced the indefinite layoff of 1,600 workers at plants in Detroit and Pontiac, Michigan, which had received such commitments. On Monday, GM announced that it would layoff an additional 1,000 workers at an assembly plant in Lansing, Michigan.

Moreover, the dissidents promote illusions that the UAW can be forced to defend the interest of autoworkers. Parker told *Detroit Free Press* Parker said, “I am hoping that Ron [Gettelfinger] is there to represent us and that if the membership says clearly that we can’t accept this, that he will do the right thing and go back into negotiations to improve it.”

The prerequisite for any serious struggle against the auto companies is to break decisively from the UAW. It is not a workers’ organization but an organization controlled by a bureaucracy whose interests are hostile to those of the workers it supposedly represents. With control of the multi-billion retiree trust fund the UAW is now becoming a big business, which will profit at the same time that it cuts the benefits of autoworkers.

Rejection of the contract is only the first step. The defense of workers’ conditions and rights must be developed on a completely new basis, entirely independently of every faction of these outlived and corrupt organizations. 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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