

Strong opposition at final Chrysler plant voting on UAW contract

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Workers at Chrysler's Belvidere, Illinois assembly plant began voting on Friday on the contract reached by the United Auto Workers union and the number three US automaker. There was widespread opposition to the sellout agreement by the 3,800 members of UAW Local 1268, which was the last major union local to vote on the contract covering more than 45,000 Chrysler workers in the US.

On Wednesday, after an intensive campaign of lies and threats by the UAW bureaucracy, which preyed upon economic insecurity of workers, the UAW was able to reverse the series of earlier rejections and push the contract through at four major factories in the Detroit area. Having experienced years of betrayals workers had no confidence the UAW would lead any serious fight against Chrysler and its new Wall Street owners, Cerberus Capital Management, and reluctantly accepted the deal.

With those votes, Chrysler and UAW officials announced the contract had won approval by 56 percent of those who had voted and that, even if the Belvidere local rejected the deal, it would pass nationally. Nevertheless many workers at the plant decided to stand up to the intimidation of the UAW and vote 'no' on a deal that would reduce wages of future workers by half, freeze current workers' wages and relieve the company of its obligation to pay retiree health care benefits.

The workforce at the factory, which is located near Rockford, Illinois, 70 miles west of Chicago, includes, as one worker put it, a "melting pot" of workers who have been forced to transfer from dozens of Chrysler factories, as far away as Huntsville, Alabama; Syracuse, New York; and Newark, Delaware, to name just a few.

These workers—veterans of plant closings and layoffs—had heard the union claims before that they had achieved "job security" in exchange for concessions. There was a determination to stand up to Chrysler and the UAW, which was betraying them once again.

There was also strong opposition among all workers to the company's demands for a two-tier wage agreement that will cut future workers' wages in half and break up solidarity among workers in the factory. Workers at the Belvidere plant have already witnessed the creation of second-class workers—when more than 600 so-called Enhanced Temporary Employees, or ETEs, were hired last year to add a third shift to the plant.

The workers were forced to sign a two-year employment contract, which provides no guarantee of future employment once it expires. ETEs are paid \$18 an hour instead of the standard \$28.75, must wait eight months for medical coverage to kick in, and can be fired at any time.

Last November several temporary workers filed a federal lawsuit against Chrysler, the International UAW and Local 1268 alleging breach of contract. Two months ago US Magistrate Judge Wayne R. Anderson ruled that they were not actual Chrysler employees covered by any contract when they signed the two-year agreement.

Unlike General Motors—which agreed to transform 3,000 temporaries into full time employees, albeit at substandard wages and benefits—Chrysler refused to hire any of these workers. Instead, the UAW

and Chrysler offered the ETEs a \$3,000 signing bonus to bribe them to sign the deal, which will essentially eliminate their jobs.

As the *Rockford Register Star* noted, "bonus essentially amounts to a severance package for most of the temporaries because the now privately-owned Chrysler is likely to eliminate Belvidere's third shift, with some workers saying as soon as December, because of slow sales of two Jeep models assembled there."

The local's president, Tom Littlejohn, publicly opposed the new four-year agreement, citing the issue of the temporary workers, although he accepted Chrysler's demand to use these workers in the first place. Like other UAW dissidents, Littlejohn has offered no serious opposition to the UAW bureaucracy and instead has promoted illusions that rank-and-file workers can force the union to defend them.

The UAW is not a workers' organization but an apparatus controlled by well-paid and privileged officials who are administering what is essentially becoming a corporate entity. In exchange for sacrificing the jobs, wages and benefits of Chrysler workers, the UAW is taking control of a multibillion-dollar retiree health care trust fund, known as a Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association or VEBA, which will make it the proprietor of one of the largest private investment funds in the US.

The prerequisite of any serious fight to defend jobs and living standards is breaking with this outlived and corrupt organization and conducting an independent struggle to unite workers in the US and internationally against the global auto giants, as well as the two big business parties—the Democrats and Republicans.

A team from the Socialist Equality Party and WSWs distributed a statement urging workers to oppose the contract ("Vote 'no' on UAW sellout at Chrysler! Elect rank-and-file committees for contract fight!"). Dozens of workers approached us anxious to express their opposition to this betrayal.

One worker, with 14 years seniority, said, "They just want us to make poverty level wages. That way you'll have to work three jobs to survive and when you work just one eight-hour day, you'll consider that a day off. How can you raise a family on such wages? Society is already going down because both parents are working and they can't raise their kids.

"I came from Chrysler's Indianapolis metal foundry—which is now an empty parking lot. People at this plant have come from Alabama, New York, Indiana, Detroit and Kenosha. Management had a stranglehold over the people here before. They would browbeat them and insult them, until we came from the other plants and put management on its heels.

"We've seen plant closings, we've seen families destroyed and forced to move and, in some cases maintain two homes, just to make a living wage. [UAW Vice President General] Holiefield came to the Indianapolis foundry and told us we were getting a good deal. Could you imagine, our plant was closing and he said it was a good deal?

"We ripped into him and we're not going to sit here and listen to them lie again. It's been years and years of concessions and finally half of the

Chrysler workers are standing up.”

Another worker said, “It used to be that your dad worked in the plant, you did and so did your kids. I wouldn’t have my kid work for \$14 an hour at Chrysler. It’s happening everywhere. The government is for big business and these corporations are globalizing to increase their profit margins.

“The politicians speak for the richest 2 percent—like the billionaire who owns Cerberus. Us workers can’t even comprehend how much money they are making.”

A temporary worker said, “I’m voting no. The ETEs are getting horned all over. I quit a \$20 an hour job in Janesville, Wisconsin, where I worked for Lear supplying parts for GM. I thought I would get a steady job at Chrysler but within four to five weeks we were told we had to sign a two-year contract or get out.

“You can’t make it on \$14 an hour, even if you have two jobs. The UAW is going down and the contracts have been getting worse and worse. They are selling us out. I thought they were just doing it to the workers in the supply plants so I came to a Big Three plant and the UAW is sticking it to us again.”

Felix, with 38 years at Belvidere, said, “I voted against it. The union is asking us to vote on a contract without being able to see it. It would be as if I took out a loan without knowing the terms. How can you ask someone to vote on a contract without a straight answer?

“The local leadership isn’t saying a lot. I was told they were sent a letter to intimidate them. It’s an incredible situation. I never thought I would see a situation like this. The union has completely sold us out.”

A young worker named Tsipiora said, “My dad’s generation fought hard for us but now he is saying the union is giving everything away. Chrysler is holding us hostage—they know we want job security and they are threatening that if we reject this, we’ll be on a long strike.

“The International sent its people from the negotiating committee who said we were going to maintain our wages and not lose anything. Another official said we didn’t have medical deductibles—she didn’t know what she was talking about. I have a child and I don’t go to the doctor because it costs \$70 a visit and that’s the ‘reduced’ insurance rate.

“Cerberus is going to carve us up. We all knew that’s what kind of company they are. They come in and slash costs and resell a company at a big profit.

“The union allowed the company to set up these temporary jobs. But you have no certainty for the future. It’s like you’re working at Taco Bell.”

Ed said, “I voted no on the contract. I don’t like what they are doing at all, especially to the two-year people. Earlier, they had a system where it took a worker three years to become a full-paid worker. When I came in it was 90 days. Each time it’s a further step backwards.”

Mary said, “A local official came up to me and began telling me how good the contract is. But I wasn’t swayed. They have been sending people from the International union all around to speak to people on the shop floor. Now, when was the last time you had people come to the plant to speak to anyone about anything? It was intimidating.”

Another worker said, “I don’t want to get started, I am so angry. We have a union that won’t do anything when it comes to a fight. I really don’t like what this company is doing. I have seen a lot of good people lose their jobs, their health care and their homes. It is really bad.”

Mike said, “I don’t like the contract at all. I don’t like the core against the non-core,” he said, referring to a new low-wage category for workers supposedly not directly involved in assembly line production.

“In four years with most of the company being non-core, will the company come around and change it on us and make everybody \$14.00 an hour? It is not fair to the new hires. It’s not fair to anyone. Why am I paying union dues for this if this is the best they can do?

“My dad is a retiree but I don’t think the VEBA will be around when I

retire in 20 years. I think the way the stock market is going, with all of the fluctuations, it will run out of money. If my kids work for Chrysler or one of the auto companies I don’t think they are going to see retirement.

“People work for 30 years to get what is called a non-core job, but now they will pay low wages. Anyone who thinks it is easy working in an auto plant has never done it. We have injuries all of the time.”

William worked at the Chrysler Huntsville, Alabama plant before he transferred to the Belvidere plant two years ago. “This two-tiered wage is terrible,” he said. They did it in Huntsville and it pitted people against each other. It was really bad. How can you have unity this way? I am totally against it.”

Andy worked at Chrysler’s New Process Gear plant in Syracuse, New York before it was sold to the Canadian parts giant Magna. “How can you have a guy making \$16 an hour working next to someone making \$27? The International is trying to shove this down our throats. Chrysler is already cutting 13,000 jobs.

“I was there during the Chrysler bailout in 1979. I took the concessions then and I want that money back. Instead they keep taking more and more. The plant I worked for changed names so many times, from ‘Chrysler,’ to ‘a division of Chrysler,’ to ‘Accustar,’ to ‘Venture Gear,’ and now, ‘Magna.’ Who is going to pay my pension?

“They say we have to compete in a global economy. Can you blame somebody in another country because they are trying to feed their families? That’s what I’m trying to do—I hope people don’t hate me for trying to feed my family.

“I’ve seen good times and bad times. All these companies are crying poverty. Yet they are still making profits on every car. If you look at the big picture, we’re in a fight for our lives. They pit worker against worker.

“There is no job security. Ronald Reagan proved that when he fired the air traffic controllers in 1981. You go around any town you see businesses for lease, for sale, condemned.

“The more money they get the more they want. I don’t think we should give back

“Why are they spending a trillion on a war when we have problems in the US that money could be used for? The politicians are taking my livelihood away.”



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