Early GM contract vote shows widespread opposition to UAW sellout

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Voting at United Auto Workers union locals this week showed widespread opposition to the agreement the UAW signed with General Motors, ending last week's two-day strike by 73,000 GM workers. The vote at most union locals has been reported as favoring the contract, but in many the margin has been narrow. Workers from at least two locals have voted to reject the contract.

According to reports on Friday, more than half of workers at UAW Local 163, which represents 1,400 workers at an engine plant in Romulus, Michigan, rejected the contract. Participation was relatively high, at nearly 80 percent. The vote was extremely close, with the contract reportedly failing by only five votes.

Significantly, the Romulus plant received a "guarantee" for future production—the main feature being promoted by the UAW to convince workers to accept the contract. The union bureaucracy has used the fraudulent guarantees, which in fact do nothing to ensure job security, to pit workers at factories who have the guarantees against workers at factories that will be shut down.

At a smaller plant in Massena, New York, workers voted 172 to 137 to reject the contract, which includes plans to close that factory.

Other locals reported close yes votes, including Local 594 in Pontiac, Michigan, where 41 percent of those voting opposed the contract. At Local 730 in Grand Rapids, 46 percent of production workers and 29 percent of skilled trades workers voted against the deal. Workers in Local 653, also in Pontiac, favored the contract by a larger margin, with 73 percent voting to approve it.

On Friday, several other locals reported a "yes" vote, including in Toledo, Ohio; Fairfax, Kansas; Janesville, Wisconsin; Delta Township, Michigan; and Lansing, Michigan. GM and the UAW have to obtain a majority vote from the total workforce in order for the contract to pass. Voting will be completed by October 10.

The participation rates at many of the locals supporting the contract were low, meaning that in most cases a minority actually cast a "yes" vote. For example, at Local 653, only 1,616 out of 2,900 workers, or 56 percent, voted. This means that only 41 percent of workers at the plant voted for the contract, while 59 percent either opposed the contract or abstained.

According to the *Detroit News*, "More than 60 percent of votes that had been cast by [Friday] morning were in favor of the deal. Locals representing about one-third of GM's UAW-represented workers have reported results so far." Several major locals were voting on Friday, and still others will vote Monday.

The reported vote totals are only a pale reflection of the opposition among workers to the contract and the UAW. Voting is taking place amidst a united front of the leadership of all union locals in support of a deal that attacks the jobs, wages, and benefits of autoworkers. The mass media has also been employed to push the contract and try to convince workers that there is no alternative but to accept massive concessions.

The UAW is particularly eager to get passed a portion of the contract that will set up a Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Association (VEBA)—a union-run fund to manage retiree health care benefits. GM will transfer to the union about $30 billion out of $50 billion in healthcare liabilities, and the union will be responsible for implementing any required cuts in benefits. The VEBA means that the union will become a business enterprise, and the fund will provide a ready source of cash to union officials.

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An article in the *Wall Street Journal* on Friday pointed to plans by GM and the UAW for a massive buyout package to press older workers to retire. These workers would then be replaced by thousands of younger workers who, according to the terms of the new contract, would be employed as cheap labor.

According to the *Journal*, "Buyouts are important under the tentative agreement because they could allow GM to have as much as one-third of its UAW work force under what is known as a second-tier wage-and-benefit plan that pays about half the traditional UAW-GM compensation package." The UAW, on the other hand, would continue to receive dues payments from these lower-paid workers.

The UAW leadership is citing the buyout package as an incentive for older workers to support the contract. According to the *Journal*, "UAW leadership...is using the likelihood of another buyout package as an enticement to older workers, many of whom would like to retire but are awaiting some sort of exit package."

For decades, the union has sought to eradicate working-class consciousness, solidarity, and traditions of militancy among its membership, pitting workers from different plants and of different levels of seniority against each other. The bureaucracy and the corporation are counting on the cumulative impact of this campaign to push the contract through.

As time passes, however, and details of the contract have begun to emerge, opposition has grown. This is why the UAW has sought a quick vote on the 500-plus page document before all the concessions in it can be thoroughly examined by the membership.

An article in Friday's *Detroit Free Press* reported that autoworkers, retirees and their families will have to pay higher co-pays for medical visits and will have fewer healthcare options under the new contract.

"The new contract would eliminate all but a few health maintenance organizations, all dental HMOs and all but the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan PPO, according to the summary" prepared by the union, the *Free Press* reported. The details of the change are being kept from the membership, however. The *Free Press* said that GM also refused to provide details.

"GM workers hoped to get more detailed answers to questions at plant sites," the newspaper reported. "But full copies of the contract, or even portions of it spelling out health coverage, are not available, several GM employees said. Many UAW information sessions are 30 minutes long, scheduled right before a vote."

In other words, workers are being pressured to vote for the contract after a brief, chloroformed presentation by the union, without a chance to look through the contract proposal or get answers to questions they have about the concessions that the contract contains.

Many workers at GM feel that they have no option but to vote for the contract given that the union is conspiring with the company against them and the absence of any organized opposition within the union itself. The fact that the contract may very well pass highlights the inability of workers to express their interests through the framework of the unions. It underscores the need for workers to break with the UAW and build new organizations of struggle, in particular a political movement against the profit system and the two big business parties that defend it.

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