

Ford Rouge workers denounce UAW sellout

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Workers at the massive Ford River Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan denounced the contract betrayal by the United Auto Workers union during several ratification meetings over the last few days. Local 600 is the largest UAW local in the country, with nearly 6,000 members employed at the Dearborn Truck Plant and frame, stamping and other facilities at the Rouge.

Voting by the company's 54,000 workers began late last week. As with the previous General Motors and Chrysler contracts, the UAW is using a campaign of lies and intimidation to push through the contract. Workers at stamping plants in Chicago and Ypsilanti in Detroit's western suburbs approved the contract by wide margins last week. Voting took place on Sunday at Local 600 and Local 900, which represent workers at the Michigan Truck Plant and Wayne Assembly, and is scheduled to be completed by mid-week.

Under the terms of the agreement the wages of new hires will be permanently reduced to \$14-15 an hour—from the current \$28.75—clearing the way for the replacement of tens of thousands of higher-paid veteran workers with a cheap labor workforce.

It is widely expected Ford will follow General Motors and Chrysler and announce mass layoffs once the contract is ratified. Ford Chief Executive Officer Alan Mulally told auto analysts and journalists last week that Ford, which is already in the midst of eliminating 44,000 jobs, was not done with its job-cutting program.

Mulally would not say how many additional jobs would be cut. "Let's talk about that next week," he said, referring to a conference call Ford is to host after the company's 54,000 autoworkers conclude voting on the contract Monday or Tuesday.

As a payment for sacrificing the jobs, wages and benefits of its members Ford will give the UAW control of a multibillion-dollar retiree health-care trust fund, known as a voluntary employees' beneficiary association or VEBA. While the company is relieved of its long-term obligations to 125,000 retired workers and their surviving spouses, the UAW will run one of the largest private investment funds in the US. In addition, a portion of this fund will be paid in Ford stock, making the UAW the company's largest shareholder, with a stake four times larger than the Ford family.

The Rouge complex, which once employed 80,000 UAW members, holds a special place in the history of the American working class. In 1932 Henry Ford's army of thugs, the Service Department, along with Dearborn police, shot and killed five Hunger March protesters demanding jobs during the Depression.

In 1941 workers waged a powerful strike against Ford's bitter resistance to unionization, and won the struggle by barricading the plant with mass pickets and overcoming efforts to pit white and black workers against each other. The strike was the first victory at Ford and led to the first "closed shop" agreement in the auto industry, which made all of Ford's hourly employees in the plant UAW members.

As early as 1947, UAW President Walter Reuther, however, targeted Local 600, whose officials were well known for their affiliations to the Communist Party and other left-wing organizations. In 1950 local leaders

were told to sign a loyalty pledge to the US or face charges of "conduct unbecoming of a union representative" and dismissal by a union trial board.

The anticommunist purges set the stage for the decades-long degeneration of the UAW and its transformation into an adjunct of management. Those who rose to the top of the organization over the last three decades have no connections to the early mass struggles of workers and have long been steeped in labor-management collaboration, hostility to socialism, and rabid nationalism.

A case in point is Bob King, the former president of Local 600, who negotiated devastating concessions at the complex in the 1980s, including the spin-off of the Rouge Steel division. In return for his loyalty to management and the UAW hierarchy, King moved up the bureaucratic ladder and is now UAW International Vice President and head of the Ford Department. In this capacity he had chief responsibility for negotiating the current contract.

These betrayals have had devastating consequences for Ford Rouge workers. In February 1999, an explosion at the Rouge Power Plant killed six workers and severely wounded 14 others. Current UAW President Ron Gettelfinger—then the head of the union's Ford department—rushed to the defense of the company, calling the power plant a "safe facility." A state investigation revealed the fatal blast had been the result of years of cost-cutting and criminal negligence by Ford, as well as the UAW, which was jointly responsible for safety conditions. Local 600 officials had repeatedly ignored complaints filed by powerhouse workers—including three of the six men killed in the explosion—about dangerous equipment, including the boiler that exploded.

Over the last few years the local has signed a series of "Competitive Operating Agreements," allowing Ford to use low-paid temporary workers and outside contractors to replace higher paid workers and institute four-day, 10-hour work shifts to eliminate overtime payments. In addition union members have been turned into "team leaders," functioning as supervisors to speed up and discipline their fellow workers.

This is the background for the bitter resentment by Rouge workers both to the company and the union. In addition, many of those who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the contract were veterans of several plant closings and contemptuous of the lies by the UAW that the concessions contained in the current contract would "save" jobs.

Randy Hall, who works at the body plant, told the WSWWS, "Did you see in the *Detroit Free Press* today that more job cuts are to come? I thought it was all supposed to be about job security. We are not getting that. Look at GM and Chrysler. The ink wasn't even dry on the contracts before they canned all those guys.

"They have loopholes in those job guarantees. They say layoffs can take place due to lack of product demand, but isn't that the reason they are laying off in the first place?

"The way I read the contract, they can force you out of the Jobs Bank after one year of drawing supplemental pay. After that you have no standing and they can hire a \$14-an-hour worker to replace you.

"I want to get questions answered. I don't think two-tier is right. What if my son wants to work at Ford? To get paid \$14 an hour is nothing when

the price of gasoline is \$3 an hour.”

“Ford has more money than it knows what to do with. Look at all they are spending now in Romania. Look at their executives. Farley (Ford marketing executive) was getting \$600,000 a year at Toyota, now he is getting \$9 million at Ford.”

A body plant worker with 18 years told the WWS, “It’s a sellout! I think there are a lot of hidden things. Two-tier wages will create a lot of animosity. Part of my fear of the two tier is that it will turn out to be more than just 20 percent. Just watch.”

He expressed anger at Ford executives wanting to cut pay while pulling in huge salaries and bonuses. “Is executive pay equivalent to what executives do? When you’re making \$26 million a year a couple of million less isn’t going to make a difference. We earn our money.

“Mulally says our pay is not competitive with that of the Asian market. Well, how competitive is Mulally compared with the Asian market?

“My problem is that they are beating up on the working class. We sacrifice our bodies for our pay. My first time working on an assembly line I woke up in the middle of the night and my hands were swollen. The next day I was told that in three years I wouldn’t have any feeling in my hands, so not to worry about it.”

Jeff, a worker with 14 years who previously worked at Ford’s Norfolk, Virginia plant, said, “I don’t agree with this two-tier wage system. This is something we fought against for years. If we let them, the company will get 20 percent of the workforce at \$14.20, then the next contract they will have everybody working for low wages.

“I came over with 600 guys who were transferred from the Virginia plant. Twelve thousand people lost their jobs when they closed the plant last May. It devastated the area—little shops were closed, suppliers shut down.”

Lisa, a worker with 15 years at Ford, said, “How much is the UAW going to stick in their pockets from the VEBA? A lot of us here came from plants in Virginia; Edison, New Jersey; or Maumee, Ohio, which were shut down. We’re Ford’s gypsies and the union did nothing for us.

“There are laid-off people left in the Jobs Bank that are supposed to get first opportunity when a job opens up, but Ford is hiring temporary workers making \$15 an hour instead. I’ve lost all respect for the union.

“At the Edison plant there was a big sign with two hands shaking that said, ‘Ford and the UAW—Working together.’ That’s exactly what they do. You even have ‘team leaders’ in the UAW yelling and screaming at you like a boss.”

Ken, a worker with 40 years at Rouge, said, “I never vote for a contract they bring back. I don’t trust the union or the company. As for the VEBA, the union is going to end up stealing the money from the retirees. They never take the cuts they make the members take. The membership has been going down for years but the union officials’ salaries haven’t gone down.

“This two-tier system sucks. When I hired in back in 1968 I was making the same thing as the guy next to me even if he had higher seniority. We were being paid the same for the same work.

The company is eliminating all the jobs off the assembly line that older workers used to take. They want to force us out of the plants to bring in workers at lower pay. I went to the union hall to ask why they were wiping out my job. They kept telling me the union guy was not in, even when I just saw him walking in.”

A younger worker who transferred from the Rawsonville Road stamping in Ypsilanti, Michigan, said his former plant was being called a “non-core” facility and under the contract all workers would be paid the lower wages. “I think this is BS,” he said, “Ford is escaping its responsibility to pay for retiree health-care benefits and they are paying us a \$3,000 signing bonus to get guys to buy this.”

Referring to the history of the local he said, “They used to divide us between black and white. Now it’s US workers and workers overseas. To

me the divide is between the rich and the poor. Race is used to camouflage the real issue.

“I can’t just lay down and let them rape me. This local is supposed to be the heart of the union and they have totally sold us out.”

Commenting on the fact that the UAW was being paid off in Ford stock, Cornell, a young worker with 12 years at Ford, said, “The union is going to be working for Ford, not us. They already do everything to please the companies. I’d also be worried about them putting the VEBA money in their pockets.”

David, a worker with 10 years, said, “The union is selling out the retirees. They were guaranteed health care as part of their contract and now after working 30 or 40 years they are being told the deal is off. Once Ford gets new hires in for half the wages those workers aren’t going to think about the retirees in future contracts. How are you going to promote solidarity when you have one group working for half the wages?

“It’s just like the government trying to take away Social Security and Medicare. The seniors are always being cut. My dad says he has to skip some of his prescriptions because he can’t afford it. You can’t make \$20 an hour all your life and then have to live on the minimum wage in your retirement.

“Bush says spending on health care and education is ‘inflationary’ but he’s spending \$13 billion a month to keep the war in Iraq going. Bush criticized Saddam Hussein but he wants to be a dictator too. They are taking away our privacy rights and you can’t protest.

“They got us brainwashed into thinking the Democrats, like Hillary Clinton, are for the blue-collar worker. The Democrats and the Republicans are the same. The two-party system is no good.”



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