

Strong opposition to CAW leadership voiced by Oshawa GM workers

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A WSWS reporting team received a warm welcome when it campaigned at the giant General Motors Oshawa, Ontario auto plant on November 1 to denounce the historic betrayal by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union bureaucracy over its recent corporatist deal with anti-union parts manufacturer Magna International.

The team spoke with assemblers and tradesmen at the afternoon shift change and also intervened among auto workers and pensioners at the union local's monthly general membership meeting just south of the plant. Over 600 leaflets (See "An historic betrayal: Canadian Auto Workers union 'partners' with Magna International") were distributed to CAW Local 222 members who voiced anger and disgust, and even stronger sentiments, against CAW President Buzz Hargrove and his supporters in the union bureaucracy.

"Hargrove better not set foot in this plant," said one worker, "or he just might end up like Jimmy Hoffa." "Get a broom and push them all out," opined another.

After reading the WSWS material, about a dozen workers came back to request more leaflets for distribution inside the plant and at the union general membership meeting.

Under the "Framework of Fairness" agreement, unveiled by Magna boss and principal shareholder Frank Stronach and the CAW's Hargrove last month, Magna will invite the union to "organize" the workers at its 40-plus Canadian plants and facilities in exchange for the union surrendering the right to strike, abrogating traditional shop-floor grievance procedures and agreeing to promote the company's corporatist labour-relations philosophy.

Rank-and-file dissension at the 23,000-strong CAW Local 222 in Oshawa had spurred the local leadership there to reverse its initial support of the deal when Hargrove first floated it several months ago in closed-door sessions. In an open letter to Hargrove, Chris Buckley, Local 222 president and chairperson of the CAW/GM Master Bargaining Committee, in a notable about-face, said he was writing "in as forceful terms as I am able to let you know that I cannot in good conscience support" the CAW-Magna deal. The letter was distributed to the local membership with an

invitation to discuss and debate the matter at Local 222's November 1 general meeting.

"A 'no-strike' clause," wrote Buckley, "goes against the fundamental rights of unionized workers. As President I represent not only our 10,000 members employed at General Motors, but also thousands more in the parts sector. It is obvious the threat Magna will pose to our parts jobs should the Magna agreement go forward in its current state. The process of awarding contracts for product is in a cut-throat state already, suppliers employing my members completely lose any level playing field if the right to strike becomes a factor in the competition's favour."

It must be noted from the outset that Buckley and the rest of the Local 222 leadership have backed Hargrove in every major retreat over the past period, from the union's electoral manoeuvres with both the federal and Ontario wings of the big business Liberal Party, to a string of give-backs and concessions in the auto plants, to the perfecting of a nationalist whipsawing strategy that has repeatedly been used to push layoffs and plant closures onto the backs of GM workers in the United States. If Local 222 leaders are moving now to oppose Hargrove's latest move, it is only with an eye to retaining some credibility with the rank and file.

Only last April, GM shocked workers in Oshawa with the announcement that it would permanently lay off 1,200 workers this December. It is expected that as a result of the GM production cuts, 7,000 other parts workers, many of them also Local 222 members, will lose their jobs as well. This is only the latest blow to the working class in the area, 40 miles east of Toronto. In 2005, GM slashed another 3,900 jobs at the facility.

John, an autoworker at the truck plant shift change, told WSWS reporters, "First, they split the union from the Americans and all that did was put Canadian members at the throats of American workers. Divide and conquer, right? Then they started getting one plant here in Canada to go against another and now with this two-tier wage crap we've got here with this Shelf Agreement and eight-month

contracts, they've basically got one guy fighting another on the same damn shift.

"Hargrove says he doesn't do concessions here in Canada. But that's bullshit. They just don't admit it, that's all. But he's not going to be able to hide it any more. Our next contract's going to be loaded with concessions. I just don't know what we're going to do. We should never have split with the Americans. That opened the floodgates."

During the course of the campaign, several auto workers responded in the same thoughtful manner. At one point, a worker after hearing that one of the WSWS reporters was from the US, crossed the parking lot to shake his hand and thank him for his solidarity against the traitors in the union.

Barry, an electrician, could not get to the union meeting due to his shift responsibilities, but he stopped to speak with a WSWS reporter before going into work, "Listen. Hargrove's got to retire. He's no good to anybody except maybe Stronach. Or the Liberals. But this Buckley's a snake too. Don't kid yourself. Tell them that for me at the meeting. He's backed Buzz every step of the way until now. He's going along with creating a temporary workforce here. We don't have two tiers here. We've got three and four. When there are layoffs he just cries and shoots off his mouth, but he doesn't fight them."

At the union meeting held later in the day, workers again were eager to take the WSWS leaflets and there was no shortage of denunciations of Hargrove's deal with Magna and the local leadership's concessions contracts at the plant. "I absolutely don't believe how they think they can get away with this," said one incredulous worker, "They're basically bringing back the company unions like they had in the old days. It's unacceptable."

Workers were aware of growing resistance to Hargrove's sweetheart deal and cited the decision by auto workers in CAW Local 88 at the CAMI-Suzuki plant in Ingersoll, Ontario also to oppose the agreement at this December's CAW National Conference. Many saw how the top union leadership is closing ranks with the aim of stifling all opposition.

Hargrove, who initially dismissed the criticism of the deal as coming from an inconsequential rump with an axe to grind over the CAW's alliance with the big business Liberal Party, suddenly changed tack and called a meeting of the national executive board this Tuesday. It endorsed the Magna partnership by a vote of 16-1. Former CAW President Bob White has also applauded the deal, saying that the union must face "new realities" and noting that nowadays, "work stoppages are almost ineffective because of economic circumstances."

Later, inside the Local 222 meeting, workers overwhelmingly rejected the "Framework of Fairness"

rapprochement with Magna. On the way out, more workers who had earlier read the WSWS team leaflet stopped to ask for more supplies so they could take them in for the Friday day shift.

There is growing trepidation amongst workers that in the wake of the massive concessions contracts signed by the UAW with GM and Chrysler south of the border, more layoffs and concessions will be demanded of them when Canadian Big Three contracts expire in September 2008. Indeed, during the WSWS campaign at the plant, breaking news came over the radio that Cerberus, the new owners of Chrysler Corporation, had just announced 12,000 more permanent redundancies, with 1,100 job losses in Brampton, Ontario and perhaps as much as 500 more in Windsor, Ontario.

This past summer, Hargrove had remarked while endorsing the Cerberus takeover that he believed there would be no substantial job losses resulting from the deal. And only last March Hargrove and the CAW leadership exhorted workers at the DaimlerChrysler assembly plant in Brampton, just northwest of Toronto, to agree to a significant package of concessions that they had strongly voted down in a February plant-wide vote.

Riding roughshod over its own constitution that restricts re-votes on matters duly settled, Hargrove and his assistant Bob Chernecki made it clear to the membership that they had to vote to accept \$5,000 in annual givebacks through the elimination of shift premiums, the intensification of work practices, and the contracting out of union janitorial jobs or accept the consequences. Should they reject the concessions, Chrysler would move auto production out of Brampton without opposition from the union bureaucracy. "It's just a matter of smart bargaining," explained Chernecki. The elimination of the third shift and the sacking of 1,100 workers in Brampton and the creation of a company union at Magna are just the latest bitter fruits of Hargrove's collusion with the auto bosses.



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