

Worker opposition to Ford-UAW agreement reflected in votes

Lawrence Porter
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The UAW signed the contract with Ford believing that an agreement would give it a boost in pushing through concessions at General Motors and Chrysler. Ron Gettelfinger, UAW president, hailed the proposed agreement with Ford as a breakthrough and has called on workers at GM and Chrysler to follow suit.

The union's plans, however, is running into sizeable opposition. According to reports released this week, in several locals the contract was either rejected or passed by very slim margins. In three locals so far, workers voted down the contract in overwhelming percentages.

At Ford's Automotive Controls Holdings LLC in Saline, Michigan, a facility of 575 workers, 76 percent of members of UAW Local 892 rejected the contract. At Ford's Woodhaven Stamping Plant, consisting of 1,273 active members, the "no" vote was 73 percent. Workers at a similar sized unit in Lima, Ohio also voted down the contract amendments, but the percentage of the vote at this point is not known.

The contract was supported by 51 percent of workers at the assembly plant located in Flat Rock, Michigan, called AutoAlliance International Inc. Represented by UAW Local 3000, the plant is a joint venture between Mazda and Ford Motor Company, where the Mazda 6 and the Ford Mustang are produced.

UAW Local 182, representing workers at the Livonia, Michigan Transmission plant, the contract narrowly passed. Significantly, 71 percent of the membership did not bother to vote, most likely sensing that the contract would pass regardless of their opposition. The union reported that the contract passed with 47 percent of production workers opposing the contract (216 voting yes, 193 voting no) and 41 percent of skilled trades workers opposing it (132 voting yes, 92 voting no).

The leadership of UAW Local 900 in Wayne, Michigan, representing 5,100 members, has so far

refused to release the vote total. While the Associated Press reported that the local approved the contract by 78 percent, when contacted by the WSWs, the local vice president, Jeff Carter, said the result "is only available for the membership. Not anyone else."

Last Sunday, a WSWs team interviewed workers at the Wayne Ford plant, who expressed vehement opposition to the contract. Not trusting the bureaucrats' ballot counting, some workers demanded that an independent observer monitor the vote. (See "Ford workers oppose new concessions")

The leadership of the UAW knows that a "no" vote at a local this size, where much of the workforce is young, would be a major blow to its attempt to force through sweeping cuts on behalf of automakers. To ratify or reject the contract the union only requires a simple majority of the 42,000 workers in the Ford division.

The proposed contract amendment calls for major givebacks on the income and benefits won by workers over decades of struggle. The UAW proposal would eliminate cost-of-living adjustments, cut overtime pay after eight hours, end two paid holidays, and reduce break time. In addition, the amendment ends the Jobs Bank, a program that kept long-term unemployed autoworkers at 95 percent pay until another auto industry job materialized. Workers won the Jobs Bank benefit in 1955.

In the lead-up to the vote, the UAW sent out a letter to its membership arguing that workers must foot the bill for the crisis in the auto industry. "Without substantial restructuring," the letter states, "Ford cannot survive on a long-term basis." Last week the leadership of the Ford division of the UAW voted to recommend the proposal to the membership with the stipulation that the agreement be reached by March 9.

For the UAW bureaucracy, the sticking point in the

concession talks with the Big Three has been over the retiree health care plan it controls, called VEBA (Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association). The VEBA agreement with Ford allows the company to use its stock in lieu of cash for up to 50 percent. After walking out of negotiations with General Motors, over the VEBA arrangement, the UAW hopes the agreement with Ford will set a pattern that GM and Chrysler will follow.

Control of the retiree health care plan was the central aim of the UAW when it negotiated the 2007 contract. The contract was unprecedented in its concessions, agreeing, for example, that new hires be paid half the wages of the older workforce. More importantly, it placed the union bureaucracy in charge of billions of dollars in the newly formed VEBA.

The VEBA agreed to by the UAW relieved the Big Three of their previous contractual obligation to provide for the health care benefits for retired workers, saving the companies billions in the process. And while the Big Three automakers owed \$88 billion to the retiree health care plan, the UAW agreed to take it over for \$55 billion.

As for the new contract amendment, recent statements by Ford have already contradicted the UAW's claim that the amendment is necessary to "save jobs." After reporting a drop in sales of 48 percent for February, the *New York Times* reported that Ford plans further production cuts, more than likely after the contract amendment is approved. The UAW's workforce at Ford has dropped from 178,000 in 1978 to 42,000 today. However, the decline has accelerated in the last 10 years. Since 2005, Ford has cut 60,500 jobs in North America—including 13,200 white-collar and 47,300 blue-collar jobs.

A WSWs reporting team spoke to workers at UAW Local 600 who were preparing to vote on the contract. Ron Mierka, a body shop worker, said he was opposed to the contract. "I think it is BS," said Ron. "I came from another plant where we had the same thing happen. As far as the union is concerned, we're going to keep giving and giving until there's nothing left to give. The unions just wanted to hand everything over. If we give this up now, we'll never get it back."

seniority, said she voted against the contract because it was time to take a stand against more concessions. "I think this whole thing is bogus. The things they are asking for, they have wanted for years—COLA, freezing SUB, eliminating overtime pay."

"They are taking income from us, but they need to be taking it from the people at the top. I look at what Mulally (president of Ford) is making and I see that he is still getting his pay," continued Ms. Williams. "I just think the concessions need to stop. We are already feeling the cuts."

Pete Maloney, a member of Local 600, told the WSWs, "We've had no pay raises for eight years. We've had to give up what people fought and died for."

Kenneth Bringman, now at the truck plant, formerly worked at GM's Fisher Body. "The same thing happened at my old job," he said. "We took concessions, and then they lay off everybody. We are the people who buy the products. If we don't have any money, nobody will buy the products that are made."

"I think we just need to take a stand. They're asking us to give up everything."



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Tanya Williams, a truck worker with 30 years