

Mass opposition grows

Ford workers speak out against contract

Our reporters
28 October 2009

Opposition among Ford workers to the United Auto Workers-backed concessions contract is growing, with a key “No” vote at a Flat Rock, Michigan plant on Monday. Seventy-three percent of the workers at the plant—which is co-owned by Mazda and employs 2,400 hourly workers—voted against the deal.

So far, five locals have voted against the contract, while only two have voted in favor. Votes against include a 92 percent landslide at both the Kansas City Assembly Plant in Claycomo, Missouri and the Sterling Heights Axle Plant in suburban Detroit. Workers at the Livonia Transmission Plant and the Sheldon Road climate control plant, both in Michigan, also voted down the contract.

According to the UAW, workers at Wayne Assembly in Michigan and Cleveland Engine and Cleveland Casting in Ohio voted for the deal, though many workers have expressed the view that the vote at Wayne (51 to 49 percent) in particular was rigged.

Another plant, the Rawsonville Powertrain Plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan, was split between production and skilled workers, with the former voting for the contract and the latter against. Both votes were extremely narrow.

The UAW has called out its top executives to campaign on behalf of the concessions and to denounce opponents of the deal. This includes Ron Gettelfinger, UAW president. However, hostility to the union executives is widespread. At Gettelfinger’s home local in Kentucky, where the UAW president spoke last week, “The chant...is to try and beat Kansas City’s 92% rejection,” according to one union official quoted by the *Wall Street Journal*.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers at two plants in Michigan on Tuesday—Livonia Transmission, which opposed the contract, and Van Dyke

Transmission in Sterling Heights, which has not yet voted. Reporters distributed the statement “Reject UAW-Ford concession demands.”

The WSWs spoke with dozens of workers at Van Dyke, and not one said they would vote for the contract.

Tom, a worker with more than 25 years experience, said that he was going to vote “No.” “When the union official came and told me that we need to vote ‘Yes’ on this contract, I started to untuck my shirt—‘You’re going to take the shirts right off our backs,’ I said.”

Tom said auto workers are angry that Ford executives continue to be paid all or nearly all of their salaries, and auto workers, who have repeatedly offered up concessions, are now being asked to once again make major sacrifices.

Robert, a worker with 15 years experience, said that concessions the UAW negotiated three years ago had cost him \$9,000. When asked why he thought the UAW is campaigning for the concessions, he said, “Gettelfinger and those cronies don’t give a damn about the workers. The UAW is a big business. It’s just a business, that’s all.”

Charles, also a worker with 15 years at Ford, said he would not believe the results if the Sterling Heights plant approves the contract. “I don’t know anybody who is voting ‘Yes,’” he said.

“When we voted on last year’s concessions contract, I just did a casual survey,” Charles said. “Just about everyone was going to vote against. You would be hard pressed to find anyone who said they were going to vote for it. But the vote went down ‘Yes,’ the way the UAW wanted.”

The WSWs reporters were warmly received by workers, but after about half an hour a man identifying

himself as a union official appeared on the scene. He did not give his name, but in an expletive-laced tirade, demanded that the reporters cease talking to workers, and leave the premises. Shortly afterwards, Ford's private security guards also appeared.

Two workers at Livonia, Mike and Tony, both with over 15 years experience at Ford, spoke at length with the WSWs, expressing their anger at Ford executives and the UAW.

"The UAW is trying to tell us that there are no concessions in this contract, that it is a good contract," Mike said. "But there is a pledge of no wage and benefit increases and a no strike pledge. New workers are making \$14 an hour and their benefits are frozen. I am afraid that 30-and-out will be the next thing to go and that they are planning to buy us out in 2011.

"We are feeling betrayed by the union," Mike said. "You can't tell us these things and treat us like we are sheep.

"I've given the best years of my life to this company," Mike added. "Some people complain about how much we make, but what people don't know is how difficult the working conditions are. It gets 115 degrees in there at times. Water is leaking all over the place. It's rotten. We are constantly breathing nasty chemicals."

Both denounced the fact that Ford management was not giving anything up, while workers were asked to make continual sacrifices year after year. "Management is getting so much more now compared to the average worker than they were a couple decades ago," Tony said.

Remarking on the growth of social inequality, Tony said, "We are in the middle of one of the biggest labor wars in history, but it is not being recognized."

Like many Ford workers, Tony and Mike expressed extreme skepticism that the UAW would carry out a fair vote. When he went in to vote on Friday, Mike said, "There were no checkers to make sure the vote was fair. We were all standing by the box; we showed each other our votes because we thought for sure the ballot would be rigged. The ballots were all unnumbered. I asked my committeeman what this was all about, and he said that it was not important. The potential was there to throw the election any way they

wanted."

"I have not voted 'Yes' on a contract since 1999," Tony added. "They are always giving us contracts with details incomplete. Then they come back and say, you voted for this or that, but we never saw it. You would be better off signing a blank mortgage contract—they'll fill it in later."

Since 2007, the running line at the plant, Mike said, has been, "Well, what did we lose today?"

"We are supposed to be a democratic society," Tony added, "but our union is run as a dictatorship. We only get to vote for the local president, and then everyone is greasing the wheels for the leadership downtown," at the UAW headquarters.

Speaking on what he thought was necessary to fight against concessions, Tony said, "If they are going to globalize the country, we are going to have to globalize the workers and fight together. Somebody is going to have to step up and unite workers globally."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact