California: NUMMI auto workers railroaded into severance package

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After nearly a year of abuse and manipulation at the hands of General Motors, Toyota and the United Auto Workers union, workers at the New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc. (NUMMI) plant in Fremont, California have approved a severance package. The vote came on March 17, just days before the plant is scheduled to close, and with virtually no advance notice.

The NUMMI plant was a partnership between Toyota and General Motors, before GM pulled out last year. It is the last auto production plant on the West Coast, and employs 4,600 workers. An estimated 50,000 workers will lose their jobs as a consequence of the plant closure, including those working at the many suppliers and local businesses throughout the region.

One day after the vote, the UAW announced that 90 percent of the workers voted in favor of the package. However, the union's headquarters in Detroit would not say how many members voted or release details of the severance agreement, according to the Associated Press.

Assuming that the count is correct, the vote of the workers is a massive declaration of no confidence in the UAW, which worked consciously to ensure the closure of the plant. The terms of the agreement are a pittance. While there is immense opposition among auto workers, which exploded at several union meetings in the run-up to the vote, workers have no reason to believe that the UAW would come back with anything better if it were voted down.

Indeed, for the UAW, the package's approval seemed to be a foregone conclusion. It issued an official statement the day of the vote that declared that the package had already been approved. "The workers don't have much of a choice," said Javier Contreras, chairman of the UAW's bargaining committee.

Although the severance package was approved, the details are still somewhat unclear for a number of reasons. Plans for a vote on the package were reported in the media only one day before it was actually held, and the UAW itself made no statement until the actual day of voting.

This was done deliberately by the UAW to push through the vote and prevent organized opposition from developing. In the public statement, Sergio Santos, president of UAW Local 2244, shed crocodile tears over one condition of the package: that the UAW cannot speak about it, which he called a violation of the First Amendment. NUMMI spokesman Lance Tomasu, however, said, "NUMMI did not issue a gag order…. In fact, the union negotiated and proposed specific language for that provision of the agreement."

Besides a few short, voluntary informational meetings on the day of voting, NUMMI workers were given no explanation of what exactly they would be agreeing to.

The shotgun vote and silence of union officials caused considerable confusion in the press and among workers. However, many sources agree that most workers would be eligible to receive the minimum severance package of $21,175—not enough to cover the mortgage on an average home or even average rent for a year in Fremont, California, or the surrounding area.

While workers who have been at the plant for more than 15 years are said to receive more than the minimum, those workers who were disabled on the job will not receive more than $21,175, according to the *San Jose Mercury News*.

Bobby Dell, a NUMMI worker for over 20 years, spoke to the *WSWS* about the severance package and the voting process. "The UAW had promised details about a severance package for several weeks and set a deadline for Sunday, March 14. We didn't hear anything, and then all of a sudden on Tuesday [March 16] they said we were going to vote on the package the next day. We were not given any written information, and nobody explained the package to us. All I know is that, we can't take any action

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for one year after the plant closes down, no grievances, nothing."

"As soon as NUMMI found a loophole to screw people, that's just what they did," said NUMMI worker Sal Gomez of Oakland to the *Mercury News* regarding the treatment of disabled workers. "The whole situation is even worse than I had expected," said David Martin, another injured NUMMI worker.

Moreover, the *Mercury News* reported that only 3,700 of NUMMI's reportedly 4,600 workers would receive any payment at all, leaving temporary, non-union and workers at NUMMI suppliers and their families with nothing.

In the same vein, thousands of workers at 23 NUMMI supply firms have nothing to depend on outside the possibility that they may become eligible for the Federal Trade Adjustment Assistance program. This would give them a modest extension on the time period they are eligible to receive meager unemployment benefits and a health insurance tax credit.

There is some discrepancy in the press over who is actually responsible for the severance package—Toyota as a whole or just the NUMMI facility. If NUMMI is to pay these severance packages, and goes bankrupt in the meantime, this could leave workers with even less. A recent article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that the federal agency that guarantees pensions says NUMMI is liable for $292 million in benefit payments but has only $161 million in assets. One condition on the severance package was that workers would not receive a dime until one month after the plant closes.

General Motors paid nothing to the workers when it quit the plant in August of last year. GM's clean getaway was largely facilitated by the UAW, which is a principal shareholder in GM.

The manner in which the vote was carried out and the quality of the severance package jammed down the throats of the workers is typical of the UAW. The plant closure was announced last summer. The union made no attempt to mobilize the nearly 5,000 workers at the plant, the tens of thousands at plant suppliers or any other section of the working class to prevent its closure.

The union did absolutely nothing about the plant closure until late February, after tensions between the UAW and its members reached a boiling point. Only then—less than a month before the plant was slated for closure—did the union hold a nationalist rally to channel workers' anger in an anti-Japanese direction through a boycott campaign.

In this chauvinist charade, the UAW was dutifully aided by the leaders of nearly every major union in the United States, including Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, and Art Pulaski, head of the California Federation of Labor. They were joined by a host of politicians from the Democratic Party, including California State Treasurer Bill Lockyer.

UAW Chairman Javier Contreras's behavior before and after the rally personifies the real attitude of the UAW before its dwindling membership: weeks prior to the rally Contreras was caught on YouTube yelling obscenities at workers gathered to discuss the plant closure. After the rally, he was taped calling the police on members who merely wanted to record his statements.

The experience at NUMMI once again demonstrates the absolute bankruptcy of the UAW, which functions as an auxiliary arm of the corporations and the government in enforcing concessions and smothering all opposition from workers. These are not working class organizations, but organizations of highly paid functionaries with a direct interest in increasing the exploitation of their membership. Any struggle by workers must be based on a break with the UAW and the construction of independent rank-and-file committees.

The plight of the NUMMI workers is not an isolated incident, but rather one component in an all-out assault on the working class. As the new representative of finance capital, the Obama administration has spearheaded the drive to impose savage cuts on the working population's access to education, health care and decent paying jobs.

Auto workers have been particularly targeted. GM's decision to leave NUMMI was part of bankruptcy proceedings overseen by Obama, during which dozens of plants were shut, and workers were forced to accept massive concessions in pay and benefits.

Jobs, wages, and benefits can be defended only on the basis of an independent political struggle of the working class, in opposition to the Democratic and Republican parties. The banks and major corporations must be nationalized and transformed into public utilities, democratically controlled and run on the basis of social need, not private profit. The attack on workers cannot be stopped without a class conscious struggle for a new society built on socialist foundations.

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