

Indianapolis auto workers drive UAW executives out of meeting

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Workers at a General Motors stamping plant in Indianapolis, Indiana chased United Auto Workers executives out of a union meeting Sunday, after the UAW demanded workers accept a contract that would cut their wages in half.

As soon as three UAW International representatives took the podium, they were met with boos and shouts of opposition from many of the 631 workers currently employed at the plant. The officials, attempting to speak at the only informational meeting on the proposed contract changes, were forced out within minutes of taking the floor.

The incident once again exposes the immense class divide between workers and union officials, who are working actively with the auto companies to drive down wages and eliminate benefits.

A vote on the changes was originally scheduled for Monday, but was cancelled by the UAW after Sunday's informational meeting made it clear that opposition was nearly unanimous. The new contract would, among other concessions, cut wages from an average of \$29 an hour to \$15.50.

General Motors, the UAW, and the state government have been working to sell the plant to JD Norman Industries, which was demanding the nearly 50 percent wage cuts as a condition for the sale. GM and the UAW are now denouncing workers for opposing the destruction of their living standards.

Workers at Local 23 voted 384-22 in May to reject reopening a previous contract, which had guaranteed that wages would remain intact in the event of a sale. GM first announced its intention to sell the plant in 2007, threatening to close it if it did not find a buyer.

Despite overwhelming opposition by the rank-and-file, UAW executives secretly continued negotiations with JD Norman, which they outlined in a document

sent to workers last week.

The meeting Sunday, a video of which was posted on YouTube gives a glimpse of the immense hostility felt by auto workers to the UAW.

"Within five minutes of its start, a loud chorus of autoworkers shouted 'no,'" reported the *Indianapolis Star*. "They could be easily heard on the sidewalk outside the union hall. Three UAW officials soon rushed out of the union hall and departed in a Chevrolet Suburban with Michigan license plates."

UAW Region 3 Director Maurice Davison, clearly shaken up by the event and expressing the general contempt of officials for the membership, told the *Indiana Star Press* that the incident was a "mob scene."

As the three UAW officials were leaving the building, workers shouted out, "Take Kennedy with you!" referring to Local 23 president Ray Kennedy, who has supported the plan to reopen the contract.

"No means no and that's it. We said no. We said no again. We don't want a contract. Close it," auto worker Todd New told WTHR, a local television station. "They get their regular pay," he said, referring to the union officials, "Why do they want to cut ours?"

"No matter how many jobs we will have at this facility, they will be poverty level and many families will have to take advantage of government programs," added auto worker Carly Burkhardt Kirchner.

Auto worker Nick Ellis told local news station WISHTV, "You just can't live on \$15.50 an hour."

Rebekah Willis, a GM worker for four years, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she was not prepared to accept a violation of the earlier contract that explicitly stated that workers' wages were to be left intact in the event that the plant was sold.

"When we went to negotiations on this contract they knew this place was to be closed or retained," she said.

“This is why in our contract it states ‘upon sale of this facility the buyer will take on the existing contract with union member employees.’ We have held up our end, and now we expect GM to do the same,” she added.

Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels has been instrumental in pushing the sale of the plant, drawing resentment from auto workers that paralleled their anger toward the UAW leadership.

“We’re talking about the governor and also Mo Davison, the director of Region 3 ... I want to see both of them take a 50 percent cut in wages and benefits, exactly what they want to hoist on us,” said auto worker Joe Gaw.

Many of the workers currently employed at the plant have been forced to move many times throughout their careers. “You go to another plant, and eight months later they lay you off again,” Pamela Artist, a worker at the plant, told the local news.

Sections of the Local 23 leadership, including bargaining chairman Gregory Clark, expressed opposition to the closure. “We pay the International to represent us, not commit fraud and work against us,” said Clark.

These expressions of opposition, however, are intended to divert the immense opposition among workers into non-threatening channels, while keeping the rank-and-file trapped within the UAW. The fact of the matter is that the actions of the UAW in Indianapolis once again demonstrate that this is a company union that works actively to increase the exploitation of the working class.

The UAW has worked closely with the Obama administration in pushing through a Wall Street-organized restructuring of the auto industry, premised on a drastic lowering in the wages of auto workers. (See “The ‘return of Detroit’: Wall Street celebrates the destruction of workers’ jobs and wages”.)

Earlier this month, incoming UAW President Bob King declared that the UAW is “ready, willing and able to do what it takes” to ensure the success of the Big Three. He concluded, “The 21st-century UAW recognizes that flexibility, innovation, lean manufacturing and continuous cost improvement are paramount in the global marketplace.” In other words, the UAW will directly collaborate with the auto companies to impose poverty wages onto workers to boost the profits of the auto companies.

The explosion at the UAW meeting in Indianapolis is the latest in a series of events exposing the anger that is building up among auto workers. In January, workers at the New United Motor Manufacturing (NUMMI) plant in Fremont, California clashed sharply with UAW executives after the UAW refused to do anything to prevent the plant from being shut down.

The author also recommends:

The class divide between US auto workers and the UAW

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