

Canada: How to fight the CAW's backroom deals

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Last week a group of laid off and retired auto workers from the now closed General Motors Transmission plant in Windsor, Ontario wrote to the World Socialist Web Site to expose the latest attempt by officials of Canadian Auto Workers Local 1973 to line their own pockets even as hundreds of autoworkers have permanently lost their jobs.

This same group corresponded with the WSWWS last year as part of their fight to expose an earlier instance of bureaucratic treachery and greed. (See: "Workers expose GM payoff to Canadian auto union officials")

GM management was forced in October 2009 to annul a secret memorandum of understanding with Local 1973 officials after outraged workers launched a campaign to recall shop committee members who benefited from the sweetheart deal.

At issue was a local or "backyard" deal under which GM secretly increased the pay of five union officials who work as full-time CAW representatives at the transmission plant. This was done by transferring them into a premium skilled-trade job classification that had been rendered defunct as a result of the concessions the union granted GM in the 2008 "early" contract negotiations.

With the transmission plant scheduled for imminent closure, the pay increases of \$3.50 per hour were timed to boost the CAW officials' pension entitlement by an extra \$500 per month. In a leaflet clandestinely circulated to the transmission plant workers, the rank-and-file opponents of the sweetheart deal calculated that each of the five CAW officials stood to gain as much as \$125,000 in additional wage and pension earnings if they survived until age 75. And this after the CAW leadership had twice reopened the contract with

GM in the spring of 2009 to force through historically unprecedented wage, benefit, and work-rule concessions.

Today, with only 21 workers left in the plant to finish its decommissioning, it has come to light that GM management and these same CAW union officials have once again colluded to ensure that the local leadership receives their just reward for "services rendered."

We reprint below our response to the group of Windsor autoworkers who contacted us last week, taking issue with the appeal that some of them have made to Canada's Conservative government, which as a result of last year's concession-tied bailout is part owner of GM, to cancel the latest sweetheart deal between the automaker and the Local 1973 leadership.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Thank you very much for forwarding information on the latest treachery perpetrated against the membership of Canadian Auto Workers Local 1973. The few remaining working members at the de-commissioned GM Transmission plant and the thousands of laid off workers and retirees have every right to be outraged at the latest actions of the union leadership.

The material that you have forwarded to us should come as no surprise to those who have followed the endless litany of betrayal that has characterized the CAW bureaucracy over the course of decades.

Only a few months ago, as was reported on the World Socialist Web Site, your group of rank-and-file union members exposed an attempt of your local leadership to secretly and illegally line their own pockets whilst simultaneously pushing a concessions laden contract on the entire Canadian membership. The Local officialdom's attempt to pad their own wages and retirement benefits even as the GM Transmission plant was set for closure was so egregious that GM was

forced to nullify their secret deal with the bureaucracy.

But such is the arrogance and sense of entitlement of these CAW bureaucrats, as your current documents show, that it was not long before they hatched another scheme to have GM reward them for quelling any opposition to the plant shutdown and managing its shuttering.

In violation of the union contract, GM has deigned to keep on at full pay these same five officials to “represent” the 21 workers left in the plant to perform the final cleaning and de-commission. That these officials will only represent the interests of the company to police the plant in its death throes is beyond any question. You point out how the local bureaucracy worked overtime to brutally raise productivity rates on the shop floor in the years leading up to the closure, helped push through a massive concessions contract and then refused to lift a finger, despite their promises, to oppose the plant shutdown.

But we must insist that your perspective of appealing to the reactionary Conservative Prime Minister of Canada and officials in the big business Ontario Liberal government is entirely misguided. In your letter to the Prime Minister you state that the government represents “all taxpayers.” In fact, the government represents the interests of the big business elite—the banks and the major corporations.

Harper’s promotion of a “taxpayer ideology” whereby the government supposedly prudently manages budget expenditures and fights bureaucratic sinecures is a ruse that has been used to justify the dismantling of social and public services and to re-direct government policy to more energetically bolster the bottom lines of the corporations. One only need look at the recent bailout of the banks and the auto companies at the expense of working people to see the bitter fruits of this perspective. Autoworkers will not soon forget that twice over the space of 6 months, federal and provincial government ministers demanded that the CAW re-open contracts with the auto companies and accept sweeping concessions.

Moreover, the statement of your colleague that other Ontario GM plant got “our six speed transmission” work plays into the hands of both company and union officials who seek to pit one plant against another in a fratricidal struggle for jobs.

The transformation of the CAW bureaucracy into a

company union is not a problem of a single local or even an entire union.

Look at the recent developments at Vale-Inco where the USW bureaucracy by demobilizing any militant strike action created the conditions that allowed one section of the union workforce to participate in the company’s scabbing operation and ultimately for the imposition of a massive concessions contract on the membership after a bitter one-year strike. Look at the current struggle of UAW stamping plant workers in Indianapolis. They have twice rejected the union’s attempt to foist a fifty percent wage cut on them, yet their union “representatives” continue to bully them to accept the concessions. (For more on this pivotal struggle see: “Indianapolis auto workers drive UAW executives out of meeting”).

What has happened at the Transmission plant is only a particularly naked example of the relationship that has developed between the pro-capitalist unions and the bosses. Appeals to the right wing Harper government are worse than useless. The transformation of the CAW into a company union demonstrates the need for an entirely new strategy—a socialist strategy that rejects the subordination of the needs of working people to the profits of the corporate bosses. In rebellion against the CAW and UAW bureaucracies, auto workers must develop a struggle to repudiate the concessions contracts, fight plant closures, and defend the jobs and wages of all workers in North America and internationally.

Thank you again for forwarding your material to us. The World Socialist Web Site is currently organizing a discussion amongst rank-and-file autoworkers on the way forward. We invite you to join that discussion and look forward to receiving further correspondence from your group.

Best Regards
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