

UAW seeks to push through Chrysler contract over worker opposition

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The United Auto Workers is increasing pressure on workers to pass a new contract with Chrysler, in the face of widespread opposition. The contract would freeze wages for four more years, eliminate cost-of-living adjustments, and pave the way for speed-ups and a vast increase in exploitation.

Several locals have voted against the deal. The UAW has sought, however, to suppress details of votes, worried that reports of opposition will encourage workers at other plants. Earlier reports of "no" votes were removed from Facebook pages run by the UAW, and locals were instructed not to release exact figures, including the number of workers voting.

Workers at the Sterling Heights Stamping Plant in suburban Detroit voted against the contract late last week (including 59 percent of assembly workers and 74 percent of skilled trades workers). According to reports, a slim majority (52.3 percent) voted for the contract at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant.

The contract has also been voted down at plants in Belvidere, Illinois; Perrysburg, Ohio; Trenton, Michigan; and Warren, Michigan. Yes votes have been recorded in Kokomo, Indiana; Detroit, Michigan; and a number of smaller facilities.

The wage freeze will mean a cut in real wages of thousands of dollars. The deal will also formalize a "competitive award" scheme aimed at tying worker wages directly to corporate profits. The union has agreed to a signing bonus of only \$1,750, with another \$1,750 held up until Chrysler meets unspecified financial targets.

The union is using the prospect of binding

arbitration—agreed to as part of the Obama administration's overhaul of the auto industry in 2009, which included the sale of Chrysler to Italian carmaker Fiat—to get the contract through. The 2009 agreement included a no-strike pledge, imposed by the company, the UAW and the Obama administration to strip workers of the ability to resist the imposition of poverty level wages.

This arrangement essentially eliminates the right of Chrysler workers to vote on the final contract, let alone fight for any improvements. Instead, the union will directly impose the dictates of the corporations and the government.

Over 3,000 workers at the Jeep plant in Toledo, Ohio are scheduled to vote Monday. At an informational meeting Sunday, UAW International and Local 12 officials told workers that if they turned the contract down an arbitrator would only impose a worse one. One local executive board member complained about other locals who "shot down the agreement."

The restructuring of the auto industry has been a critical component of the Obama administration's aim to transform the United States into a cheap labor platform that will ensure record corporate profits.

Like GM and Ford, where contracts have already been ratified, Chrysler is seeking to significantly increase the number of tier-two workers who make about half the wage of tier-one workers. Chrysler is pledging to hire 2,100 additional workers, mainly at the lower wage. The union is attempting to sell this as a commitment to preserve "middle class jobs."

Some workers will be forced to take a significant wage cut as a result of the deal. Kim, a worker with nearly three decades experience, currently working at the Toledo Jeep plant explained, "They have these

‘Temporary Part Time’ workers, but that is just a label because they work 40 hours or more every week. They get \$21 an hour and just medical but no dental or optical coverage. When the contract goes through they are going to lose \$5-6 an hour.

"One of those workers got up at the meeting and told the local officials, ‘I have a wife and three kids. Who can live on \$15 an hour?’ Even some of the seniority guys are going to be knocked down to \$20 an hour."

Another Toledo Jeep worker told the WSWS, "Labor in general is having its wages downsized. They make it sound like we are being paid too much, but we are in there breaking our backs. The company doesn't make any profits without us, but they make it like we should be grateful just to have a job."

Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne, who also runs Fiat, is using the low wages imposed in the US to increase pressure on workers in Italy. On Friday, Italian workers staged a one-day strike to protest layoffs and attacks on wages and benefits. Fiat is threatening to leave the country altogether if workers don't agree to significant cost reductions.

Kim added, "They are constantly eliminating jobs and people are busting their tails to keep up. They double up the work on each car and make it impossible for you to collect workers' compensation when you are injured from all the repetitive work.

"It's nothing like it used to be when you earned respect for all the time you had on the job. Now they don't accept doctor's explanations and will get rid of you for any excuse. Everybody is under the gun at Chrysler. We've been screwed under all the owners, Daimler, Cerberus and now Fiat.

"Fiat complains that we make more than workers in Europe. Well, I know in Germany workers are getting 45 days paid vacation. We only get two weeks in the US. The Fiat leaders lied to us, and now they are telling workers in Italy they are going to move production to the US.

"The UAW is broken. People feel they were crapped on. We even had our Christmas bonus taken away. They put a gun to our heads to take away our right to strike. This contract is going down at our local.

"They've turned it into a glorified sweatshop in the factory. There is climate control but it's always, 'keep on working, mush!' You can't get off the line to take a break."

Asked about the growing protests against Wall Street, Kim said, "I love it. It's about time. This didn't happen overnight, it has been a process, over years. The corporate executives and the Wall Street bankers did this to the economy. People have been reduced to 401(k)s and are losing everything. It's not only happening in the US, it's happening in Greece and Germany. It's a global depression."



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