

UAW imposes contract on Chrysler workers

Jerry White
27 October 2011

The United Auto Workers International Executive Board voted to impose a new-four year labor agreement on 26,000 Chrysler workers Wednesday despite a split vote, in which 56 percent of skilled trades workers voted “no,” while the union claimed a majority of production workers voted “yes.”

The action underscored the thoroughly undemocratic nature of the UAW, which has now pushed through contracts on behalf of all three Detroit automakers—General Motors, Ford and Chrysler. The contracts destroy longstanding gains and expand the use of low-paid second tier workers throughout the industry.

In a statement Tuesday, the UAW claimed production and skilled workers passed the contract with an overall vote of 54.75 percent to 45.25 percent. The UAW did not, however, release the actual vote totals, adding to the already widespread suspicion among workers that the results were manipulated.

After the sellout agreement was defeated last week during initial votes at factories in Illinois, Michigan and Ohio, it suddenly gained momentum and culminated in a dubious 73 percent “yes” vote at the Warren Truck plant in suburban Detroit Tuesday. A worker at that factory—where opposition was very widespread—told the WSWs that such a result was “unfathomable.” Another accused the UAW of “flipping” the vote.

Chrysler workers, like GM and Ford workers before them, were deeply opposed to a four-year pay freeze, the expansion of the hated two-tier wage system and the continued assault on working conditions and living standards. Chrysler’s 5,000 skilled workers were particularly hostile to the elimination of 27 classifications and the consolidation of skilled trades into five classifications, which threatens their pay and job security.

Under the terms of the UAW constitution, skilled trades workers—including electricians, machinists, repairmen and others—vote as a separate body since there is specific language in the contract affecting them. If this provision has any meaning at all, skilled workers have the power to veto a contract if the majority votes to reject it.

Shortly after announcing the split vote—the first since the 1973 Ford contract—the media speculated that the new agreement would have to be put on hold while the UAW either organized a re-vote for skilled workers, renegotiated the parts of the contract related to them or submitted the whole contract to an arbitrator. In 2009, the UAW agreed to a ban on strikes and binding arbitration as part of the Obama administration’s restructuring of Chrysler and its takeover by Italian automaker Fiat.

In a rushed meeting Wednesday afternoon, however, the UAW’s top body, the International Executive Board, ignored the decision of the skilled workers and pushed through the contract “for the good of the overall membership, despite the no vote,” the *Detroit Free Press* reported.

In a curt news release, the UAW declared, “Because a majority of UAW skilled trades members voted against the tentative hourly agreement, under the UAW Constitution, the UAW International Executive Board (IEB) investigated the reasons skilled members voted against the proposed agreement and determined that these reasons were predominantly economic and not unique to skilled trades members. Accordingly, the IEB declared the agreements ratified under the UAW Constitution.”

This mockery provoked immediate disgust and anger among workers. On a Facebook page run by the UAW, several ridiculed claims that the union “investigated” why skilled tradesmen had turned down the contract. “How many trades had someone come to them or call them and ask why they voted the way the did?” one worker asked rhetorically. Others denounced the UAW for running roughshod over their rights (“So the ‘democratic’ union lets us vote but the votes just don’t count. Nice, real nice...”)

An Ohio Chrysler worker wrote: “There you have it folks! So this will be the same crap they pull next contract when we all vote the garbage proposal down! International will put it thru regardless!!! THE UAW HAS BEEN BOUGHT BY THE BIG 3!”

It is impossible for the sentiment of Chrysler

workers—which was overwhelmingly against the contract—to find expression within the UAW, which is controlled by an upper-middle class stratum of businessmen that answers only to the auto bosses and the government.

Faced with opposition to the Ford contract earlier this month, top UAW officials threatened that a rejection would lead to a strike, and Ford would replace workers with strikebreakers. In the case of GM and Chrysler, the UAW told workers a rejection would lead to an arbitrator imposing an even more onerous deal, including the loss of signing bonuses. The majority of workers who voted for the contract did so reluctantly, knowing full well the UAW would do nothing to defend them, let alone fight for an improved contract.

For decades the union has collaborated in the destruction of jobs and living standards in the name of making the corporations more competitive. The UAW has overseen a 50 percent reduction in the number of hourly workers at Detroit's Big Three automakers in the last five years alone. GM has reduced its union workforce in the US to 48,000 from 129,000; Ford is down to 41,000 from 74,000 and Chrysler has shrunk its union workforce to 22,000 from 56,000.

In order to boost sagging dues revenue, the UAW has offered its members up as cheap labor to entice the automakers to bring some production back from Mexico, China and other low-wage countries. The new contracts, which limit labor cost increases to the lowest level in four decades, will add some 20,000 low-paid jobs—and nearly \$10 million a year in dues revenue for the UAW.

The UAW also owns hundreds of billions of dollars in corporate stock, giving it an additional financial incentive to drive down wages and increase the exploitation of its members.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Warren Truck workers in suburban Detroit. “Everybody I spoke to said this was contract was a joke,” Ken said. “When they posted in the plant that it was passed by 70 percent, we said, ‘you’ve got to be kidding.’”

“Nobody believes [the vote total],” said Carolyn, a worker with 12 years. “It’s not a very democratic process. We don’t have a say-so; they act like we do, but we don’t. The local approves what the International tells them to. It’s all a clique, and we don’t even get to vote for International officials. How can you say you are protecting us when you have a stake in the company?”

“There should never have been two-tier wages. We knew this contract would be bad, but we didn’t get

anything back after sacrificing so much.”

Frank, a worker with nearly two decades at Chrysler said, “The UAW had already made their decision when we came to vote. It’s been a rough road for the last four years, but we aren’t going to get anything in the next four. We lost so much—cost of living increases, Christmas bonuses—because the Congress was saying that we were paid too much. A lot of workers have families and others are raising kids on their own.

“There are so many people out of work, and the ones working are steadily having things taken away. I wouldn’t call us the middle class because it’s doing okay, and I’m not. We’re fighting to be okay.

“A lot of workers fought for these rights. Now we’re being told to be happy we have a job. After this contract, the majority of the workers at our plant will be making \$19, instead of \$28. Then, if they say they are having financial difficulties, they will cut their wages again.”

Commenting on the UAW, he said, “How can you continue to support something that is always tearing you down? I’m not the only one thinking that.

“The protests on Wall Street made me smile. It shows people care,” he added. “I’ve been wanting to go to downtown Detroit to join them.”

Also pointing to the anti-Wall Street protests, Ken said that the protesters “are showing they’re sick and tired of big business and bankers. Students take 2-4 years of college and are so far in debt and millions are in process of losing their houses. I’ve been trying to get a mortgage modification loan for four years from Chase. It would be great if this could blossom into something that the working class people can actually benefit from.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact