

# A lesson for autoworkers: The short lived Windsor, Ontario Dakkota strike

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Last Monday, a strike by 190 workers at the Dakkota Integrated Systems' auto parts manufacturing plant in Windsor, Ontario was quickly scuttled when Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) officials forced a re-vote on a contract that had been rejected by 62 percent of the facility's unionized employees only one day before. This shameful "vote until you get it right" episode sheds important light on the collusion between the CAW and the auto bosses.

At the initial stormy contract ratification vote meeting held Sunday afternoon, CAW Local 444 officials strongly recommended acceptance of a deal that provided for a paltry 50 cent an hour increase in each of the three years of the proposed agreement as well as some modest benefit improvements.

But workers, many of whom make only \$17 per hour, angrily rejected the offer, citing the huge profits now being made in the industry and the inflated incomes of the auto magnates. Others argued that Dakkota's practice of "short shifting," i.e., sending workers home without pay for up to half-an-hour per shift, would be stepped up, rendering the small pay increase moot.

In an unsuccessful attempt to pressure the membership, CAW officials threatened that if the tentative agreement was not ratified Dakkota could lose its supply contract with Chrysler and be forced to close operations. But what really worried the CAW bureaucrats was the impact that a strike at the parts-maker would have on the profits of Chrysler shareholders and their own cozy relations with the Detroit Three auto companies. Negotiations in Canada for new contracts with Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors are scheduled to begin this summer.

Dakkota provides instrument panels for minivans at Chrysler's giant Windsor assembly plant on a "just-in-time" delivery schedule. A strike at Dakkota would

have an immediate effect on three other parts manufacturers in Chrysler's supply chain and would, in a short space of time, impact minivan production. Such a prospect horrified the CAW leadership.

After workers set up picket lines late Sunday night, CAW bureaucrats articulated the gulf that exists between the union officialdom and the rank and file, expressing their "shock" at the membership's rejection of the contract proposal. Local 444 vice-president Dino Chiodo complained, "We endorsed it unanimously from the bargaining committee, and we presented it to our membership and they resoundingly said that they are not interested." Local president Rick Laporte added, "To me, it's like committing suicide. Chrysler isn't going to stay down a whole lot longer before they look elsewhere for a supplier."

By 2 a.m. on Monday morning, production was idled at three of Chrysler's feeder plants. Work at Windsor Chrysler Assembly was shut down shortly thereafter.

Reaction to the Dakkota strike came quickly from Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne. "This is not the way to build a car company," he said. "Our people have an incredibly short memory of what happened back in 2009. I have zero empathy for that process today. I would ask everybody to come back to their senses and clean this stuff up".

Then, weighing in on the upcoming contract negotiations with the CAW for a new Chrysler contract, Marchionne threatened, "If this is the beginning of the willingness on the part of our friends on the other side of the border to carry out ... if that's the basis on which we're going to move forward, I think we're going to have a very difficult round of negotiations." The Chrysler CEO has already made it clear that despite the auto maker's renewed profitability—the company has now overtaken Ford and General Motors to rank

number one in Canadian sales and gleaned almost a half a billion in profits last year—he will demand significant concessions over and above the \$19 per hour cut in labour costs the CAW ceded in the 2009 “bailout” agreement.

Marchionne has repeatedly stated that wages at Chrysler Canada are uncompetitive with lower-cost facilities south of the border and must be reduced further. He has called for the abolition of two-tier wages at Chrysler’s US plants in favor of a single lower tier. Entry-level wages in American auto plants currently stand at \$14 per hour.

After Marchionne’s outburst, Chrysler unceremoniously voided a three-year guaranteed supply letter of agreement with Dakkota.

CAW national President Ken Lewenza understood exactly what his friend in the CEO’s chair was demanding. His officials were, he complained, blameless and at the receiving end of a bum rap caused by a rebellious membership. “I’ll have to talk to Sergio about the content of his terminology because the reality is that since the rejection of the tentative agreement, the CAW representatives have been working around the clock trying to find a resolve,” he commented.

That same morning, an “emergency meeting” of the striking membership was slated by the bureaucracy for the afternoon. The meeting lasted only 40 minutes. Union officials began the meeting by announcing the withdrawal of the guaranteed supply letter of agreement and predicted that the continuation of the strike would shortly result in the outsourcing of the Windsor jobs to the United States. There would be no altering of the rejected contract. As a sop, it was announced that the union had obtained a letter from Dakkota management promising to “examine” the reasons behind “short-shifting”.

Workers were then herded into the voting booths. Realizing that their industrial action would receive absolutely no support from the organization that ostensibly exists to defend them, they voted by 75 percent to end the strike.

Kudos from management to the CAW officials were quickly forthcoming. The role of the union as a policeman for the company on the shop floor would not go unrecognized. “We appreciate the way in which Local 444 leadership worked together with our negotiating team in an environment of trust and mutual

respect while protecting the interests of their members,” declared a statement from Dakkota. “Getting the difficult situation resolved was a collaborative effort, recognizing the implications of a long-term strike would have for all of us.”

For his part, local 444 President Laporte promised Marchionne that his union will continue to do what it can in the company’s best interests, stating: “The commitment that we lost means we will have to gain the confidence of Chrysler Corporation. This particular work group was a shining star in the corporation’s eyes before the rejection yesterday.”

The actions of the CAW only underscore the fact that it cannot be reformed and forced to respond to the needs of auto workers. Over the last three decades the union has been transformed into a pro-company organization, controlled by an upper-middle-class layer of highly paid officials that answers only to the corporations and the government.

The only way forward for workers is to break decisively with this anti-labor organization and build rank-and-file committees, independent of the CAW, and to wage an industrial and political struggle, based on a socialist and internationalist program, to fight for well-paying and secure jobs for all workers.



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