Dundee Engine Plant workers boycott special union meetings

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Members of United Auto Workers Local 723 at Chrysler's Engine Plant in Dundee, Michigan largely boycotted special meetings Thursday called by union officials in the wake of a decisive 73 percent rejection of a tentative local contract.

The low turnout reflected the anger and frustration of rank-and-file auto workers, who rightly have no confidence in the UAW. The union has permitted intolerable conditions of overwork in the plant, including forced overtime and weekend work.

The overwhelming rejection of the agreement gave powerful expression to the growing opposition among auto workers to a relentless attack on wages and working conditions spearheaded by the Obama administration. While the rejected contract covers only local issues, the workers were clearly motivated by opposition to the national agreement imposed by the UAW and the company after the bankruptcy in 2009—including the implementation of a two-tier wage structure.

Management has instituted work schedules of up to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, indefinitely. The plant has been turned into a modern day sweatshop, with more than 50 percent of Dundee workers recently hired at the second-tier wage rate. There is also a "third tier" of contract workers in the plant making wages of as little as $9 an hour, while still required to pay union dues.

The union meetings were held at a Holiday Inn near the plant—one at 2 p.m., before the start of the second shift, and one at 5 p.m., after the end of the first shift.

UAW Local 723 Plant Chairman Tom Zimmerman earlier told local media that the contract was "a win-win." Since its rejection, the union has been attempting to intimidate workers, spreading rumors that work would be shifted out of the plant unless the agreement is ratified.

Many workers driving in to the meeting expressed their opposition to the contract. Socialist Equality Party supporters distributed an SEP statement calling for workers to continue to reject the contract and for the mobilization of the entire working class on an independent political basis. (See, "The struggle at Dundee Engine: A fight for all workers")

One worker told the WSWS, "I voted the contract down. It didn't give us anything."

At the second meeting, as an arriving worker began to speak on the contract, a manager from the Holiday Inn came out and insisted that the SEP leave the area. He said he was sent out by his client, the UAW. When SEP supporters defended their right to speak to workers, he called the police.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has published interviews with workers on the conditions in the plant. Copies of the first WSWS report on the contract rejection were distributed at the plant and circulated among workers. Many workers said they had no confidence the UAW has any interest in listening to workers' complaints or returning to renegotiate a new contract.

The company is insisting that even though the local contract was rejected, production will continue because of the no-strike clause in the Chrysler national agreement. Chrysler Spokesperson Jodi Tinson announced after the rejection, "We are not going to reopen negotiations. We had an agreement we expected to be ratified. Now it's back to the Local to figure out what went wrong."

Both the company and the union are terrified by the threat posed by independent worker opposition to the brutal working conditions they both support.

Many workers are employed as independent

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contractors and have little job security. A contract worker who asked not to be named told the WSWS, “They’re trying to put the screws to the workers. I haven’t been talking shop much with [the workers who rejected the contract] because we’re in a different local under a separate UAW contract. But you know, they have to work for eight months before they can even get health insurance. I think that’s crazy!

“We start at $9 an hour,” he explained. He added, “Sometimes there is a little bit of a confrontation between contracts and Chrysler guys, because there’s the feeling that a contract worker is doing something the Chrysler workers should be doing.” Most of those working on the line, he said, were brought in on a second-tier wage.

“Today they didn’t have the air conditioning on, I don’t know why,” he continued. “I don’t understand why they don’t have a third crew in there. The company puts so much on second shift. They want mandatory overtime and weekends. It’s not fair.”

“Cars aren’t any cheaper. There are people working with me who have two or three kids. How are they living? I don’t know how they survive. To think these guys are working 60 to 70 hours a week, and they’re driving old beat up cars. You’d think you’d see all new cars in the lot. But they can’t afford what they make.”

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