The battle ahead for US autoworkers

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Negotiations opened this week in Detroit between the United Auto Workers union and General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler (FCA) on new contracts covering 140,000 workers, whose four-year agreements expire September 14.

The opening of talks was marked by a grotesque display of UAW-management unity. Held at UAW-GM and UAW-Chrysler joint facilities, representatives from both sides wore identical shirts adorned with company and union logos. So incestuous was the atmosphere that UAW President Dennis Williams and Fiat Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne skipped the ceremonial handshake and instead embraced one another before the cameras.

"Our goal is for GM to prosper, for shareholders and consumers to win and for all UAW members to share in the prosperity of their achievements," Williams gushed on Monday. A statement from the UAW celebrated the "collaboration between the UAW and General Motors," which had netted GM "an approximate $6.6 billion North American profit for 2014."

Such statements could be uttered only by an organization that is thoroughly hostile to the interests of the working class.

The highly-paid UAW executives have certainly shared in the prosperity. Williams enjoys combined salaries from the UAW, corporate boards and joint investment funds of approximately $324,400. It is an entirely different story for the autoworkers the UAW claims to represent.

Veteran workers have suffered through a decade-long pay freeze, which, along with the elimination of cost-of-living adjustments, has resulted in a 25 percent cut in real wages. Some 40,000 workers hired after 2007 under the hated two-tier wage system negotiated by the UAW are so poorly paid, they cannot afford to buy the cars they build.

Having amassed $73 billion in North American profits since the 2011 contract was signed, the automakers and the Wall Street investment firms that control them have no intention of letting up. On the contrary, they are demanding sweeping cuts in health benefits, ever-greater speedup, and the permanent replacement of base pay increases with bonuses tied to productivity and profits.

To ram through these concessions, the automakers are once again putting a gun to the heads of the workers and threatening them with mass layoffs and factory closures. On the eve of the contract talks, Ford announced it was moving production of several models from its Michigan Assembly Plant to Mexico, threatening the jobs of 4,000 Detroit-area workers.

On Tuesday, Marchionne said costs at FCA's factory in Toledo, Ohio were still too high to locate a new Jeep Wrangler model there and the fate of 6,500 workers hinged on the UAW wringing new concessions from them.

The auto companies have the full backing of the Obama administration, which oversaw the slashing of autoworkers' wages in the 2009 bailouts of GM and Chrysler, setting a precedent for wage-cutting throughout the economy. Under Obama, labor's share of the national income has fallen to its lowest level on records going back to the 1950s, while the share going to corporate profits has continued the meteoric rise that began in the 1980s.

It would be a serious and dangerous mistake for autoworkers to think the UAW can be pressured into defending their interests. All workers have to do is look at the past three-and-a-half decades to see that the UAW is nothing more than a company union.

From the late 1970s onward, the auto companies funneled billions of dollars into joint programs overseen by the UAW, creating new sources of income for the union executives, who aided in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the gutting of

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wages, benefits and working conditions.

A new legal framework had to be established to accommodate the system of labor-management committees and funding schemes because they violated provisions of the 1935 Wagner Act, which prohibited employers from dominating employee organizations or making financial contributions to unions.

Despite the efforts of the corporate-controlled media to fool workers, the present negotiations do not involve adversarial parties. The UAW functions as an agent of the corporations, with deep ties to the Democratic Party and the state. Its main concern is to ensure its income stream, particularly under conditions where "right to work" laws in Michigan and Indiana are certain to lead to an exodus of dues-paying members.

To this end, Williams has already signaled his support for bringing in a "third tier" of workers, making as little as $10 an hour. The UAW is also offering to expand its multi-billion-dollar retiree health care trust fund to encompass active and even salaried employees, relieving the corporations of their health care obligations while providing the union executives with a bigger investment vehicle.

The more apparent the depth of class divisions becomes, the more the union execs and their political supporters deny the class struggle. But the class struggle has not disappeared. For the last four decades, due to the betrayals of the unions in the US and around the world, it has been fought by one side only. This has led to a terrible regression in the social position of the working class and an immense increase in the wealth of the corporate bosses and bankers.

If autoworkers are to prevent another sellout, they must fight for an independent mobilization of the rank and file in opposition to both the companies and their UAW servants. The framework for this struggle must be established through the formation of rank-and-file action committees, independent of the UAW. These committees will have the task of establishing lines of communication between factories and preparing an all-out fight to abolish the two-tier system and secure the right to good-paying and secure jobs for all workers.

Over the next two months, the Socialist Equality Party will carry out an aggressive campaign to clarify the issues facing autoworkers and assist in building these independent organizations of struggle. Crucially, the SEP will seek to develop a new political orientation and strategy to guide the struggles of autoworkers and the working class as a whole.

In opposition to the nationalism of the UAW, the SEP insists that workers in the US can fight the global auto companies only by uniting with their brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada and throughout the world.

In opposition to the UAW's commitment to the corporations' profits, the SEP maintains that poverty, inequality and war will be ended only when economic life is reorganized along socialist lines to meet the needs of the world's producers, not the parasites who dominate the economy and the government. We advocate placing the global auto industry under the common ownership and democratic control of the working class and reorganizing it to produce safe and affordable transportation and a good standard of living for autoworkers.

To fight for this, workers must be organized as an independent political force, in opposition to the Obama administration and the corporate-controlled Democrats and Republicans. We urge autoworkers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to begin this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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