

Autoworkers vote for strike as UAW continues silence on talks

Shannon Jones
18 August 2015

United Auto Workers (UAW) officials are continuing their silence on the content of their talks with US automakers as Fiat Chrysler workers continue to vote overwhelmingly in favor of strike authorization.

Workers at the Fiat Chrysler Warren Truck assembly plant in suburban Detroit have voted 98 percent for strike authorization while workers at the Trenton engine plant voted “Yes” by a 95.5 percent margin. A vote at the Sterling Heights Assembly plant is set for Thursday. This follows overwhelming votes to strike at the Belvidere, Illinois and Detroit Jefferson North assembly plants.

A strike authorization vote for workers at General Motors is scheduled for August 27. The UAW has apparently not yet set a strike vote date for Ford workers.

The determination of workers to fight stands in sharp contrast to the stonewalling by the UAW. The silence of the UAW on the progress of the talks with less than a month to the September 14 contract expiration raises a number of questions.

Why isn't the union keeping workers informed? Why aren't the demands of the UAW being made known? What are the auto companies proposing? Why do workers have to rely on the corporate-controlled media for information, or rather misinformation?

In years long past it was a regular practice of the UAW to publicize its contract demands each day, by circulating leaflets to all of its members as they were being presented to the auto companies. This was key for building the momentum for a strike. However, the UAW has not called a national strike since 1976, when it struck Ford. In 2007, the UAW called a limited two-day strike, derisively called a “Hollywood” strike by many workers. The UAW followed this bogus strike by immediately accepting the two-tier wage scheme.

If the UAW chooses not to tell workers what it is doing it is only because it is preparing an even greater sellout. Indeed, the union has only called a pro forma strike vote because it is mandated in the constitution. In fact that last thing the UAW wants is to encourage militancy among the rank-and-file.

The UAW is well aware that with US car companies making huge profits autoworkers are determined to abolish the two-tier wage system and to win a substantial pay raise on top of that. But the UAW does not represent these workers. Instead it is a company union whose top executives rake in hundreds of thousands of dollars in salaries and payoffs for suppressing opposition from workers and delivering to the auto bosses an ample supply of cheap labor.

Whatever its rhetoric about “bridging the gap,” the UAW is committed to help the auto companies impose further reductions in production costs. This includes higher deductibles and co-pays for health insurance as well as the creation of a third-tier of super-exploited low-paid workers.

At the same time the UAW bureaucracy is seeking to win new perks and sources of income for itself by extending the retiree health care trust fund to cover both hourly and salaried workers. The establishment of the trust fund, or VEBA, financed with billions in auto company stock, gives the UAW a direct incentive to protect its investment income by cutting health benefits.

As a Toledo Jeep worker aptly told the WSWS, “It’s a racket, the original message of the unions was great but it’s not that way anymore. Our union guys go golfing with the bosses and we have no representation unless you’re family.”

A second tier worker at the Fiat Chrysler Warren Truck plant spoke to the WSWS following the strike

vote. “We are building 600 trucks a day at this plant that are selling for about \$40,000 apiece. I don’t think we are even getting one percent of that.

“I argue with other workers that the company is not about to move everyone up to the top tier. They are more likely to bring the top tier down.

“From what I get, everyone believes there will be a strike. Honestly I don’t think there is a set game plan. Why aren’t we being told anything? It is like they are saying ‘trust us.’ All it seems like we are getting is speculation. I know crunch time is coming.”

The ruthlessness typical of American big business is demonstrated by the ongoing lockout of 2,200 steelworkers in six states by Allegheny Technologies. The company has halted production at 12 facilities and, in an assault on the workers, brought in strikebreakers backed by paramilitary-style private security guards. In carrying out this attack the company rejected concession offers by the United Steelworkers and demanded even more draconian cuts in health care, pensions and working conditions.

With the contracts for some five million workers, including 30,000 steelworkers, expiring this year, the unions have rejected a united struggle to win back concessions and defend jobs. Instead, union officials are working to divide and demoralize workers in order to better impose the demands of the corporations.

Top union officials like UAW President Dennis Williams and USW President Leo Gerard sit on Obama’s corporate competitiveness and trade policy boards, where they work with corporate CEOs to slash labor costs and boost their profits. The unions are opposed to a struggle by any section of workers because it would lead to a direct confrontation with their ally, President Obama, whose major economic policy is wage-cutting and shifting the costs of health care and pensions from the employers to workers.

Various defenders of the UAW, including fake left groups such as Labor Notes, Spark, Autoworker Caravan and the Workers World Party, claim the problem is that Williams and the rest of the UAW leadership have a “flawed strategy” of labor-management “partnership” which could be altered if workers pressured them.

This is a fraud. Williams and top negotiators Norwood Jewell, James Settles, Cindy Estrada & Co. are not misguided individuals. They head up an

organization that long ago abandoned the interests of workers in favor of colluding with the auto companies.

While workers have suffered hundreds of thousands of job cuts and a historic reversal in their wages and conditions over the last 35 years, the UAW apparatus has accumulated billions in corporate stocks, positions on corporate and government boards and fat salaries from company-funded “joint” programs. Far from being persuaded by the pressure of workers, the UAW is determined to defend these assets by betraying workers once again.

The fight to defend jobs, wages and working conditions cannot be pursued on the basis of attempting to pressure the UAW, but requires the building, of new, rank-and-file organizations democratically controlled by autoworkers. To mobilize the strength of autoworkers and every section of the working class to secure the social right to good-paying jobs, workers must be guided by a new political perspective based on internationalism and the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact