

WSWS campaigns for unity of US and Canadian autoworkers

Jerry White
22 August 2015

With a little more than three weeks before the expiration of contracts covering 140,000 autoworkers in the United States, a campaign team from the *World Socialist Web Site* Autoworkers Newsletter spoke with General Motors workers in Canada about the need for an international strategy to fight the attack on jobs and wages.

Workers at the GM plant in Oshawa, Ontario, 40 miles outside of Toronto, expressed concerns that are very familiar to workers in the US and around the world. Global corporations like GM shift production anywhere they can find cheaper labor and “whipsaw” workers against each other in a struggle for ever-lower-paying jobs.

The older consolidated GM plant in Oshawa, which produces the Impala sedan and the Chevrolet Equinox, is scheduled to close in 2016. Meanwhile other, sections of the plant have been sold off to auto parts suppliers, including Ceva Logistics, which pays as little as \$18 (US\$13.65) an hour.

Rather than opposing this, Unifor, formerly the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), has accepted one concession after another just like the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US.

Andrew, a college graduate who works at the Oshawa plant as a supplemental worker employee (SWE) said, “I was a student six years ago. They worked me just enough so that I didn’t get any benefits. Now I’m a SWE, which isn’t much better. I see how they play workers off each other, especially with temporary workers like me.”

Workers in Canada had no less disdain for the big-business political parties of all stripes—Liberal, Conservative or New Democratic Party. Several stopped to discuss with campaigners the need for a political alternative for the working class in order to

fight for their interests. “All the corporations are concerned with is the almighty dollar,” was a common refrain.

In opposition to the unions’ complicity in pitting workers against each other, GM workers at the Oshawa plant welcomed the call for forging the unity of the working class to defend the right of all workers to secure and well-paying jobs.

Jim, a young production worker, said, “I came in here three years ago and we didn’t have the same pension as the older guys and you start ten bucks less than the guy across the line from you. The union does nothing to stop it. Hell, they promote it. Our local president was bragging that we’ll have plenty of older guys retiring soon who make the full wage so he’s telling the company, don’t worry, we’ll soon have mostly second-tier guys in here and your costs will go down big time. It’s like he’s selling low pay to the company.”

Bob, a senior autoworker, expressed his concern for younger workers, “I’ve been here since the ‘80s and one thing is for sure: the union isn’t what it used to be. I’m getting out. But I feel for the younger guys coming in. They don’t have anything. How do you raise a family on 18 bucks an hour? GM’s making profits hand over fist but nothing’s coming our way. I never thought I’d say it but you know, I’m glad to be old.”

Asked what he wanted to say to American autoworkers, Larry Popadyn, an auto parts worker for Ceva Logistics, said, “They’ve given back for so many years, I hope they take something back this time. The two-tier wages have reduced wages for the entire working class. It is not good for Canadian or American workers; it pits worker against workers in the plants,” he concluded.

Evincing the broad opposition to the two-tier system amongst autoworkers in Canada and the United States,

another worker said, “We should all be on the same tier. It isn’t good for morale. We’re all basically doing the same job.”

The Oshawa manufacturing complex, which originally started car production in 1919, was once among the largest automotive factories in the world, employing nearly 30,000 workers. Today an estimated 3,000 workers remain. That number will soon fall by another 1,000 once production of the Camaro model is moved to Lansing, Michigan in November.

“They say they are moving the Camaro line there because it is more efficient, but we don’t believe it,” Don Way, a senior GM worker said.

Don also spoke about the split of the Canadian Auto Workers, now Unifor, from the UAW in 1984-85. “I was here when the UAW split—that was a huge mistake. Workers in the two countries should have stayed together, there is strength in numbers.”

The CAW emerged out of a nationalist split within the UAW. Refusing to unite autoworkers on both sides of the border against the wage cutting and corporatist policies of the UAW leadership, the future CAW leader Bob White broke away, claiming there was a “Canadian road” for autoworkers.

The CAW strategy of retaining car production based on the labor cost advantages of a weak dollar and subsidized health care has been virtually eliminated by the savage cost cutting the UAW has carried out in the United States.

With contracts for 23,500 autoworkers in Canada set to expire in July 2016, the transnational corporations are threatening to shift more production to the US and Mexico if workers do not accept more concessions. Since 2000, Detroit’s Big Three automakers have closed five assembly plants in Canada.

Unifor has responded to the wage-cutting agreements by the UAW in the US by providing the auto companies with its own version of the two-tier system. In the 2012 contract, the then-CAW agreed to a 10-year pay scheme that starts new hires at \$20 (US\$15.16) an hour or 60 percent of the regular rate of \$34 (US\$25.78). The union also gave up defined benefit pension plans for new hires, who are now enrolled in a hybrid scheme that combines defined benefits and contributions, according to the *Windsor Star*.

In a recent interview with the *Toronto Star*, Unifor national president Jerry Dias said that Canadian

autoworkers are “already highly competitive with their US counterparts.” With the Canadian dollar now down below 80 cents to one US dollar, he argued, the relative cost of a Canadian worker is lower than his or her US counterpart.

A wave of retirements set to hit Canada’s auto sector would further help the profits of the automakers, Dias told the *Star*. “A year from now, about two-thirds of Oshawa is retirement-eligible, which means the plant is replaced by people whose all-in costs are half of that of a legacy employee,” Dias said. “GM will save billions.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact