Autoworkers defy UAW bid to ram through Fiat Chrysler contract

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The WSWS urges auto and other workers to sign up for the Autoworker Newsletter *and leave your comments. Sign up for the Autoworker Newsletter Facebook page* here.

The opposition of Fiat Chrysler (FCA) workers is growing to efforts by the United Auto Workers to ram through a new four-year labor agreement that maintains the hated two-tier wage system and further erodes the living standards and working conditions of nearly 40,000 FCA workers.

Barely a week after the UAW agreed to the deal, and just days after workers forced the union to release the full contract, the UAW is holding votes at several union locals without giving workers any time to study the nearly 1,000 page document. Some locals have called informational meetings where UAW officials dodge questions and seek to paint the agreement in the most favorable colors, while other locals are not even bothering to hold such meetings.

Workers at the Fiat Chrysler's parts division, Mopar, reported to the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter that there was widespread opposition to the deal during the UAW Local 1248 vote in the Detroit suburb of Centerline, Michigan on Wednesday. A Facebook post reported that it had been defeated, but these reports could not be confirmed.

A Mopar worker told the WSWS, "People were yelling 'vote no,' so they stopped the meeting, and they asked 'who said that.' A guy stood up and said, 'I did.' Then they had this guy come and tell us about how bad strikes were to scare us. It was all planned out. It was orchestrated."

The UAW claims the new contract provides a "pathway" to end the hated two-tier wage system—which pays 17,000 FCA workers hired after 2007 little more than half the wages of traditional workers. In reality it creates even more tiers to divide workers. Second-tier parts workers at Mopar and axle operations will receive a maximum wage of $22 and $22.35 per hour respectively over the next four years, less than the $25.35 that tier-two workers with six years seniority will get at other plants.

Dozens of workers from Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit and other factories marched in front the UAW's misnamed Solidarity House headquarters on Wednesday morning. Workers carried signs denouncing the UAW's refusal to abolish the two-tier system.

The new agreement violates a pledge from the UAW in 2011 to reinstate a 25 percent cap on FCA's second-tier workforce, which would force the company to immediately transfer 7,000 lower-paid workers to the first tier. Instead, the so-called "in-progression" workers will have to wait up to seven years before they reach a new maximum wage of $25.35 per hour, with no guarantee that the UAW and the company will not revoke this in the next contract citing "economic problems."

"The UAW is a business that is fattening its pockets, and it has been happening for years," Frances, one of those protesting at the union headquarters, told the Autoworker Newsletter . "I worked for 10 years as a TPT [Temporary Part Time] worker. Then five years ago I was changed to a full-time, second tier worker, and my pay fell from $28.23 to $16.66. The union did that to us."

When the UAW first agreed to the two-tier system in 2007, it included a requirement that the proportion of tier-two workers be capped at 20-25 percent of the total workforce. During Obama's 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler, the Treasury Department removed the caps but ordered that they be restored by September

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2015. In 2011, the UAW FCA contract "highlights" claimed the 25 percent cap would be "reinstated at the end of the contract, as outlined in the bankruptcy settlement agreement." At that time, all workers in excess of that percentage were expected to receive "the same wages as traditional Chrysler workers."

According to the Automotive News, "The issue of the 2011 cap was brought up last Friday at a meeting with local leadership to go over the terms of the tentative agreement, according to a person in the room. In response, UAW Chrysler Vice President Norwood Jewell said the cap in 2011 had been 'a typo,' the person said."

An FCA spokeswoman told the *Wall Street Journal* earlier this year that union and company negotiators did not sign the necessary paperwork in the 2011 contract, and so the deal setting the cap was no longer valid.

With the complicity of the UAW, nearly half—or 47 percent—of FCA workers are on the lower pay scale. The aim of both the company and the union is to force out older, higher paid workers—through a combination of back-breaking speedup, an absentee policy that will facilitate dismissals and so-called "voluntary" retirements—so the entire workforce will be permanently lower paid.

During Wednesday's informational meeting at UAW Local 7, union officials lamely argued that the company only gave the union "two choices" relating to the tier-two workers. Either shift 7,000 tier-two workers onto the first tier and get no raises for the rest of the second- and first-tier workers, or agree to the seven-year progression to $25. What the UAW completely excluded was abolishing of the two-tier system, which is the chief demand of autoworkers. Dozens of workers reportedly left the meeting en masse to go to the protest at Solidarity House.

The deal also includes plans for significant cuts in healthcare that will more than offset the meager raises for both tier-one and tier-two workers.

"This is a bad contract," Kim, who has six years at the Jefferson North plant, said. "They are giving us two choices: take pay cuts or we'll shift production to Mexico. The union officials use the strike fund to fill their pockets. I'm paying $40 extra in union dues per month for what?"

Commenting on the international scope of the struggle of workers, Simone said, "I don't want to deny workers in any part of the world a decent living. We should fight for everyone to live well. I saw a documentary on the how workers at Foxconn are treated, and how they live. They were committing suicide, rather than continue working under those conditions. We are not going to commit suicide. We will fight."

Joanne, with five years at Jefferson, said, "The UAW told us the next contract would push us to the first tier. We have to pay house, car and life insurance. How are we going to send our kids to college? We want to be paid what we are worth."

Patricia, with five years, said, "I am worried about my mother's pension. My father started at Chrysler when he was 16 years old and worked more than 40 years. My mother is concerned about getting her widow's pension."

Deneen, a former American Axle worker whose strike was sold out by the UAW in 2008, said, "We are concerned about the contract because they won't even agree to honor the 2011 contract. With the attendance policy they want to implement, I fear a lot of people will be terminated. A lot of us take care of older parents and sick spouses and need Family Leave time. Now they say we have to use our sick pay/vacation time as part of that leave."

Alonzo, a third generation autoworker, said, "Young workers want a future. But with the companies and the government taking away pensions, I'll have to work until I die. We're in there every day with our bodies breaking down and they should pay us. I've been a second-tier slave for eight years. If I voted for this contract I would be guaranteeing that my son had no future."

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