

# The significance of the “no” vote at Fiat Chrysler

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The tentative contract announced just over two weeks ago by United Auto Workers President Dennis Williams and Fiat Chrysler (FCA) CEO Sergio Marchionne has suffered a landslide defeat at the hands of autoworkers in the US. On Thursday, the UAW officially announced that the deal had been voted down by a 65 percent margin, though at many plants the percentage of “no” votes was significantly higher.

The vote is a milestone in the development of the class struggle in the United States. It is the first time that autoworkers have rejected a national contract in 33 years. Workers have overwhelmingly defied the combined efforts of the auto companies, the UAW and the corporate media, using lies, threats and intimidation, to push through a contract that expands the hated two-tier wage system, initiates a major attack on health care for current workers, and paves the way for a further downsizing of the US auto industry.

The “no” vote is the beginning of a counteroffensive against relentless attacks that have spanned decades, from the first Chrysler concessions contract in 1979 to the Obama administration’s forced bankruptcy and restructuring of the auto industry in 2009. During this period, the organizations calling themselves unions have abandoned all pretense of organized resistance and ceased to carry out even the most basic functions with which they were traditionally associated.

Since the late 1970s, the trade unions as a whole have worked to eradicate any open expression of opposition to the dictates of the corporations and the government. Contracts have become synonymous with givebacks. Any connection between rising productivity and improved wages and benefits has been completely severed. This has been a major factor in the devastating decay of living conditions for the working class throughout the country.

Workers in the auto plants have known nothing but concessions. The mounting anger and frustration have engendered a growing mood of resistance.

The shift in consciousness has ignited the wildfire of opposition at Fiat Chrysler. So complete is the alienation of the unions from the workers that the massive “no” vote took the UAW leadership entirely by surprise. Following the rank-and-file rejection of the agreement, the union and its allies in the media are treating the debacle as a question of public relations—a failure to communicate.

A persistent theme in the media commentary is fury over the role of “social media,” by which the commentators mean the widespread discussion of the contract among rank-and-file workers, a process that was facilitated by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. Over the past two weeks, the *Newsletter* has been followed on a daily basis by several thousand autoworkers. It has told the truth about the contract, countering the lies of the UAW and exposing the union-corporate conspiracy against the workers. It has provided a platform for the workers themselves to speak out. Its call for the formation of rank-and-file factory committees independent of the UAW has found a substantial response.

Now that the contract is defeated, the auto companies, the UAW and the Obama administration are engaged in intense discussions over how to respond to the workers’ rebellion. Regardless of the workers’ vote, they intend to push ahead to achieve their aims. Under these conditions, the question of an ongoing struggle, organized and coordinated by rank-and-file factory committees, assumes immense importance.

More than 75 years ago, Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International, explained the significance of factory

committees in the development of the class struggle. Deeply critical of the conservatism of the trade unions, even during a period in which they were involved in major class battles, Trotsky called for the formation of such committees in every workplace in the founding document of the Fourth International, written in 1938.

“The prime significance of the committee,” he wrote, “lies in the fact that it becomes the militant staff for such working class layers as the trade union is usually incapable of moving to action.” Factory committees “open the doors, if not to a direct revolutionary then to a pre-revolutionary period—between the bourgeois and the proletarian regimes.” That is, they open the doors to a struggle by the working class against the capitalist system.

Since these words were written, the unions themselves have undergone a colossal degeneration, particularly over the past four decades. These organizations, which even in their heyday worked to subordinate the working class to the capitalist system, have responded to the globalization of production and the decline of American capitalism by integrating themselves ever more directly into the framework of corporate management.

The UAW and the AFL-CIO as a whole can no longer be termed workers’ organizations. They function as a labor police force, which seeks to impose the demands of the corporations while pursuing the interests of the privileged upper-middle class stratum that controls them.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party anticipated that the development of a struggle in the working class would inevitably assume the form of a clash with the trade unions. The call advanced by the *Autoworker Newsletter* for the formation of rank-and-file factory committees is aimed at overcoming the dictatorship of these organizations on the shop floor and developing in every way possible the independent initiative of the workers themselves.

This perspective has received a powerful confirmation. The middle class and pseudo-left organizations that have insisted it is impermissible to challenge the authority of the unions stand politically exposed. The WSWS is routinely denounced by these organizations as “sectarian” for refusing to work with the union apparatus and the Democratic Party with which it is aligned. What they mean by “sectarian” is

fighting for the political independence of the working class, which is possible only by breaking the stranglehold of the unions over the workers.

The rebellion of autoworkers is one expression of the reemergence of class struggle in the US. This has profound international significance. The American ruling class, with its aspirations for global dominance, is confronting at home an increasingly angry, hostile and revolutionary social force. It is a process that must, and will, take on an increasingly open political form directed against the foundations of class rule and the capitalist system itself.



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