

The significance of the Fiat Chrysler workers' fight

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Forty thousand Fiat Chrysler (FCA) workers in the United States are voting today and tomorrow on a new pro-company agreement backed by the United Auto Workers union, following the overwhelming vote by FCA workers earlier this month to defeat the first sellout deal agreed to by the UAW.

Workers should reject this agreement just as emphatically as they did the first. A “no” vote would set a powerful example for General Motors and Ford workers and create the conditions for a counteroffensive by workers in the US and internationally against the relentless, decades-long attack on jobs, living standards and working conditions.

The experience of autoworkers over the past month has made clear that the fight against the companies requires the creation of independent organizations of working class struggle and a new political strategy to counter the anti-worker united front of the Big Three auto companies, the UAW and the ruling class as a whole.

If anything, the second deal is even worse than the first. Stunned by the two-to-one rejection of the first contract, the UAW and FCA conspired to work out an amended contract that adheres to all of the basic demands of the company. The two-tier wage and benefit system is expanded and the framework is established for permanently and drastically lowering the wages and benefits of all Big Three workers. This includes the permanent elimination of cost-of-living increases, the phasing out of pensions, drastic cuts in health benefits, and forced overtime with no premium pay.

The deal, which Fiat Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne calls a “transformational” agreement, lays the basis for the destruction of all of the gains won in bitter struggle by previous generations of autoworkers

and the transformation of autoworkers into a super-exploited, cheap-labor workforce. Once the older, higher-paid workers, whom Marchionne has called a “dying class,” are driven out of the plants, the entire workforce will be paid near-poverty wages and subjected to relentless speedup.

New and stunning revelations about the contract, concealed by the UAW, have sparked widespread anger among rank-and-file workers. These include the fact that the contract allows a doubling of the number of low-paid temporary workers, a major step toward the reduction of most of the workforce to casual laborers with no job security or benefits.

The UAW is pulling out all of the stops to prevent another “no” vote, which, in the words of the *Detroit Free Press*, would leave the union in “uncharted territory.” The union has hired a public relations firm to spin the deal as “the richest we have ever negotiated.” It is using a combination of lies, job threats and red-baiting attacks on the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* in an effort to wear down the opposition.

Rejection of this new sellout deal is only the first step. A successful struggle requires a clear understanding of the forces arrayed against autoworkers.

Behind Marchionne stand the Wall Street banks, determined to extract every dime possible from the workers to funnel into the stock market. The entire political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike, supports the company offensive. Obama, the so-called “candidate of change,” has orchestrated the greatest transfer of wealth to the rich in US history while initiating an attack on health care in the form of his Affordable Care Act.

The UAW is itself a business, selling its services as a

labor police force in return for fat salaries and expense accounts for its hundreds of upper-middle class bureaucrats. It, like the rest of the official unions, is not a working-class organization. It has pursued a decades-long strategy of integrating itself into the framework of corporate management.

As it colluded in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, losing more than half of its dues-paying members, it developed other sources of income, such as joint company-union slush funds, stock holdings in the auto companies, and control over a multibillion-dollar health care trust. It has a direct financial interest in helping the auto bosses increase the exploitation of the workers it claims to represent.

Working in tandem with the UAW are phony “labor lefts” organized in outfits such as the Autoworker Caravan, the *Labor Notes* publication, and pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization, Workers World Party and Socialist Alternative. Fearing a rebellion by workers against the union apparatus, the Autoworker Caravan, which is comprised of lower-level UAW functionaries, has not even called for a “no” vote, telling workers instead to “vote their conscience.” The more the workers rebel, the more these groups defend the organizational stranglehold of the unions.

The UAW cannot be pressured into reforming itself. Its decades-long degeneration and transformation into an arm of the corporations and the government stems not from the subjective corruption and cowardice of its leaders, but the failure of its pro-capitalist and nationalist program. What the UAW has long denied is becoming clear to millions of workers: society is divided between two main classes: the working class, whose collective labor produces society’s wealth, and the capitalist owners, who appropriate that wealth to further enrich themselves.

Autoworkers have powerful enemies. But they have millions upon millions of allies who are potentially more powerful. The resounding “no” vote on the first contract was an expression of the deeply felt opposition of the working class in the United States and around the world to the looting of society by the financial aristocracy.

Whatever the outcome of this week’s vote, autoworkers, to carry forward their struggle, need new organizations, independent of the UAW, which reject

the capitalist framework and the lie that there is no money to secure the social rights of the working class. Workers should elect rank-and-file factory committees to prepare a counteroffensive, demanding the right to secure and decent-paying jobs and full employer-paid health care and pensions.

The struggle for these basic necessities raises the political question: Who will rule? If the fate of humanity is left in the hands of financial aristocrats and money-mad speculators, their quest to squeeze every last dime out of the working class will inevitably lead to industrial slavery, dictatorship and war.

The alternative is a political struggle by the working class to take power in its own hands in order to break the economic and political dictatorship of the super-rich, place the banks and basic industries under the collective ownership and democratic control of working people, and reorganize the world economy to end social inequality and raise the material and cultural level of humanity.



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