

Skilled trades workers voting against UAW-GM agreement

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With voting concluding today on the General Motors-United Auto Workers tentative agreement, the final vote tally remains close. The UAW has been mobilizing its apparatus and pulling out all the stops to try to push through the agreement and overcome substantial opposition.

While sentiment against the agreement is widespread among all workers, GM's 8,500 skilled trades workers have been voting against the deal by wide margins. At several plants where the UAW has reported an overall "yes," vote, the majority of skilled trades workers have rejected the contract.

According to the UAW constitution, a contract can only pass if it is supported by both production workers and skilled trades workers. On two previous occasions—including the 2011 contract at Chrysler—the union has simply overridden this requirement to push a contract through.

Plants recording "no" votes from skilled trades workers, often by wide margins, include: Fairfax Assembly (66 percent "no"); Arlington Assembly (84 percent); Flint Assembly (60 percent); Toledo Transmission (59 percent); Lansing Grand River Assembly (52 percent); Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly (58 percent) and the GM Tech Center (66 percent).

In a worried article, the pro-company *Detroit News* reported that of 11 locals where it was able to collect vote totals for skilled trades workers, 61 percent had voted "no."

In preemptive preparation for a decision by the UAW to override the skilled trades vote, the newspaper writes, "However, the UAW can overrule a rejection by skilled trades workers if the union finds they voted against it for reasons other than issues unique to skilled trades." In addition to the 2011 contract, the UAW carried out a similar maneuver in 1973.

This argument gives the UAW executives wide latitude to simply declare that the "no" vote from skilled trades workers was motivated by issues common to production and skilled trades workers.

Among the issues motivating opposition to the contract is the fact that it sanctions the further erasure of distinctions between job classifications among skilled trades workers, raising safety issues and opening the way to the destruction of jobs.

Under the "cross training" language for skilled trades workers implemented in the 2011 contract, workers are getting less than adequate instruction. Further, the UAW-GM contract continues to allow for the expanded use of outside contractors.

A veteran worker at the Orion Assembly Plant north of Detroit told the WSWS, "We used to have a requirement that two skilled tradesmen work together, now it is only one. We have only two millwrights on each shift that have to cover the whole plant, 80 acres under the roof. And a contractor does third shift maintenance."

In May 2015, a 53-year-old skilled trades worker, Donald Megge, was crushed to death at Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant when he was working alone.

Over the past decade there has been a steady erosion in the wages and working conditions of skilled trades workers. The use of outside contractors has been expanded at the same time that the wages of skilled trades workers have been frozen.

A skilled trades worker at GM told the WSWS, "When I started my apprenticeship in 1998 when we had a contractor come in we were making \$3 more an hour than the contractor. Now, the contractors are making \$3 to \$5 to \$10 more than me.

"I used to work at a major stamping plant. Every

press had a die in it. We had to change the dies out on a regular basis. All those dies had to be moved with cranes. So crane safety was absolutely imperative. You were picking up stuff that weighed 60 tons. For four years all I did was inspect and work on cranes.

“They changed the major/minor language to allow GM to subcontract that work out. They grandfathered some people in, but once those people were done inspecting they began bringing in outside contractors to do inspections every 30 days.”

The worker added: “We also used to work on building maintenance projects. They now subcontract out that work. When we ripped out some of our lines and rebuilt the lines, our maintenance crew did a lot of that work. That work has now gone away. Under the major/minor rule, if it takes two trades people more than eight hours to do a job, they outsource it.

“They started putting that language in the 2007 and 2009 agreements, but they didn’t start implementing it until the last few years. They told us we voted on it in 2011... We didn’t know about it, and the union didn’t tell us.

“A friend of mine went to work at Aeromark. They manage the trades in a lot of facilities. He just told me that he has been told that the GM policy is, if you have a piece of machinery, they don’t want us fixing anything other than that equipment. They don’t want us to do building and construction work because they can outsource it for less.”

The new contract continues the erosion of living standards for both skilled trades and production workers. In addition to maintaining the two-tier wage system, under terms of the proposed contract there is no pension increase, and skilled trades workers are not eligible for the \$60,000 incentive available to production workers who take retirement.

The GM skilled trades worker continued, “A lot of skilled trades workers have 20 plus years, but there has been no raise in pensions since 2003. I only get a 97-cent-an-hour raise, three percent. I am still at the same wage that I was at under the 2003 agreement.”

He spoke about the efforts of the UAW to ram through the sellout agreement at GM.

“A lot of people feel like we took it in the shorts for 12 years. The union has sold us out. The same international union that said they were going to cap the percentage of tier-two workers at 25 then said it was a

‘typo.’ You don’t put stuff in like that unless you are trying to bamboozle people.

“And [UAW Vice President for GM] Cindy Estrada, who has never worked a day in her life, said that they are ‘working our ass off for you guys.’ Well, they had a document ‘Inspire the desire to retire’ explaining how they wanted to push skilled trades workers out.

“Would I trust someone I was buying a used car from and everything looks great, but I take it out and it breaks down? No. I will never trust them again.”



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