With Ford pact in jeopardy, UAW intensifies economic blackmail

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The United Auto Workers held a hastily called press conference Wednesday morning in an effort to intimidate workers and reverse the tide of growing opposition at Ford before voting ends Friday.

The groundswell of opposition was expressed in an overwhelming "no" vote at Chicago Ford Assembly, with workers voting 2-1 against the contract on Tuesday and Wednesday. This followed the rejection of the deal by a similar margin at Louisville Assembly Plant and Kentucky Truck Plant.

Workers also voted "no" this week at the Kansas City Assembly Plant, Buffalo Stamping, the Cleveland and Lima, Ohio engine plants and the Sterling Axle and Rawsonville Powertrain plants in suburban Detroit.

The defeat for the UAW at the two Kentucky factories changed the momentum of the national vote, which beforehand had been narrowly in favor of the pact. The UAW reported that the vote had changed to 52-48 percent against the contract Wednesday before the Chicago Assembly Plant totals came in. Workers at Flat Rock Assembly Plant also voted on Wednesday.

The UAW has calculated that the 8,500 workers at the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan, who are voting on Thursday and Friday, will determine the fate of the agreement. That is why, in a rare if not unprecedented move, it called the press conference in the middle of the contract vote at UAW Local 600 hall to threaten workers with unemployment or a fruitless and financially ruinous strike if they rejected the deal.

Having barely survived a near rebellion of Fiat Chrysler workers and a split vote by General Motors workers, the UAW officials present, including Vice President James Settles and Local 600 President Bernie Ricke, had the demoralized and frightened look of the occupants of a besieged castle, if not cornered rats. At one point Settles described the situation as "looking very dark."

With the situation on such a knife's edge, the UAW could not permit any questions that might further expose the nature of its sellout agreement and tip the balance. While welcoming reporters from the corporate-backed media, UAW Local 600 officials barred reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* and forcibly removed them when they questioned why they were being singled out. (See: "Video shows UAW officials grabbing cell phone, forcibly ejecting WSWS reporters from press conference")

Settles and Ricke tried to reassure the media, and through them the auto bosses, that the UAW had the situation under control and could still be relied upon to overcome the resistance of workers and impose the corporations' dictates.

Ricke began the conference by hailing the deal, saying there was a "lot of money for wages and benefits and for health care." The cause of the opposition among workers, he insisted, was "misinformation and social media stuff." He went on to slander "16,000 new members who have not been through this process before" for lacking an understanding of the need for a "balanced" agreement.

By a balanced agreement, Ricke means ensuring continued super-profits for Ford, which has made more than $50 billion since 2009 and is on its way to pulling in nearly $10 billion this year. While workers have suffered the consequences of the UAW's "balanced" approach with near poverty wages for second tier workers and a decade-long pay freeze for older workers, corporate executives made off with millions in bonuses and retirement packages, and billions more have been shoveled to Wall Street.

If workers pressed for higher wages, Ricke insisted, they would be out of work. "We can negotiate $50 an hour, but without investment, there are not jobs." He went on, "If we put Ford at too much of a cost disadvantage with the other companies, they are a corporation and they are going to do what they got to do."

Spoken like a real company man! The job of the UAW is to ensure that the company is not placed at a "competitive disadvantage" by relentlessly slashing the living standards of the workers it claims to represent.

A reporter asked, "What is your message when you run into people who say, 'we should just strike.' How do you

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answer them?"

Ricke replied by threatening workers with impoverishment. "The reality is you get nothing for the first week you are off and you get $200 afterwards. I don't think people are thinking the reality of it. A strike doesn't do anybody any good. Doesn't do the worker any good, doesn't do the company any good. It's obviously the last resort in negotiations, but I think a strike would be bad for both sides."

A more open declaration of prostration before the companies could hardly be possible. Ricke did not explain why workers should be limited to starvation rations of $200 a week when the UAW's $600 million strike fund would be enough to pay every Ford worker $1,000 a week for three months. The real reason is that the UAW has long used the money as a slush fund, siphoning off some $400 million over the last 30 years for its perks and privileges. The UAW has not called a national auto strike since the Ford walkout in 1976.

While the threat of a strike used to be a weapon in the hands of workers against the corporations, the UAW has converted it into a weapon of the union and the company against the workers. A strike under the control of the UAW would not be a genuine mobilization of the working class against the corporations, but more like a lockout aimed at starving workers into submission.

Settles reiterated this threat after a reporter reminded him of his statements in 2011, when he said that if the contract was rejected the UAW International would authorize a strike and Ford might hire replacement workers. "I don't remember making that statement about replacements, but by law, if you do go out on an economic strike, they do have the right to do that."

Settles added to this an explicit threat that if workers rejected the contract their plants would close and they would be thrown on the streets. "We have more investment at Ford than at General Motors and Chrysler put together… We hired over 22,000 people since 2011 because of that [2011] agreement. I seriously think if we don't ratify that will be jeopardy."

Egged on by a reporter who asked, "Could we see the parts plants close?" Settles continued with threats, "When you go back to the table, everything is off the table and anything is liable to come up, contrary to the improper opinion, especially of the younger people, who think you go open door number two and see if there is something behind it. That's not how real negotiations go."

Settles again slandered younger workers for failing to understand the UAW's bargaining strategy. "As you know, and many of our young people don't know, we do pattern bargaining, which means the wages are in place when it comes to us… Younger workers don't understand if Ford pays more than everybody else they would be at a disadvantage with the rest of the companies. Even though we are only seven percent of the cost of a car that money has to be passed on somewhere—and that makes them in an unfair labor position."

Having made his way up the ladder of the UAW apparatus during a period when the UAW adopted the corporatist outlook of labor-management "partnership," Settles has fine-tuned arguments that are indistinguishable from those of Ford executives. The only class consciousness Settles & Co. have is that of upper middle class managers and aspiring investors who want to increase their share of the profits extracted out of the hides of autoworkers.

Settles then reiterated his complaints against "social media," by which he means above all the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, which thousands of autoworkers have turned to for the truth about the sellout deal. Singling out the young workers again he said, "We try to do the best we possibly can to educate them to the process… but too many times they rely on answers from other folks instead of being directed to our web site…There are a lot of misnomers. Our staff keeps an eye on the news and they say, 'Hey, there are these misnomers and they are starting havoc by not telling the truth,' and it's difficult to track all of that."

A reporter cut to the chase and asked, "With the Fiat Chrysler 'no' vote, GM hanging in balance, Wisconsin on strike against Kohler, do you worry that the UAW image of a friendlier organization willing to work with companies is in jeopardy if workers reject this deal?"

Indeed, the UAW only continues to exist due to the good graces of the corporations and the government, which employ it as an industrial police force against the working class.

While Settles said he was "optimistic" the deal might still be rammed through, the fact is the UAW has been exposed during this entire contract struggle as an enemy of workers and a tool of the auto bosses.

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