

Widespread opposition as voting begins on second UAW-Nexteer deal

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A palpable mood of determined opposition was present Thursday as workers began voting on a second agreement reached by the United Auto Workers and Michigan-based Nexteer Automotive. The 3,350 workers at the former General Motors complex in Saginaw, 90 miles north of Detroit, build steering components for GM and other automakers.

Workers defeated the first deal, which included poverty wages and high out-of-pocket health care costs, by a stunning 97.5 percent on December 6. In the face of the near rebellion by workers, the UAW called a bogus 20-hour strike and shut it down before it halted production at several GM plants. The UAW ordered workers back to their machines without giving them a chance to see, let alone vote, on a reported new deal.

Showing its contempt for workers, the UAW then dumped hundreds of disjointed and confusing contract pages onto its Facebook page and told workers to vote on it with little or no time to study the details. At least 13 pages were missing. The UAW distributed them on Thursday after workers complained, but many had already voted.

The new deal is largely a rehash of the first, outside of an attempt to exploit the economic desperation of hundreds of production workers currently making \$12 an hour by offering them an upfront \$2 an hour raise (with lower wage increases later in the contract) and a slightly larger signing bonus.

“There is no change in the contract,” one worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* outside of the UAW Local 699 hall where workers were casting their ballots. “They are taking away our rights. The supervisors don’t care about you even if you are a good worker.

“I spend more time at work than I do at home. In five years McDonald’s workers will be making \$15 dollars an hour, as much as we are making. Cost of living is going up, but we lost our cost-of-living a long time ago. They

took it away from us in exchange for \$5,000. We lost on that one.”

Another worker said, “It’s all smoke and mirrors. Twenty miles north of us at GM they are making more money. Why for this group of 3,000 workers are we getting less? We do the same work. I don’t care what they claim, this place is owned by GM. Nexteer is just a front.”

The deal does not restore the concessions given up by workers in 2010 when the UAW and GM imposed wage cuts of 40 percent, claiming they would be restored after a new buyer, Beijing-based Pacific Century Motors, got on its feet and became profitable. The new deal also sanctions a dictatorial regime in the factories, with supervisors given a green light to suspend or fire workers on the flimsiest grounds or banish them to the worst shifts.

In an effort to push the deal past the resistance of workers, the UAW and management have launched a campaign of intimidation, including threats that the factory complex will close if workers vote ‘no’ again. Several workers have reportedly been fired, including probationary workers who joined the strike, although at least some were reinstated after protests from rank-and-file workers.

“I thought the union was for us,” a worker with nine years said. “Instead, the union and management are working hand-in-hand. They are not fighting for us. Anything going on with management the union tells us, ‘do as they say.’”

He continued, “We do all this work for GM, but they claim that GM has nothing to do with Nexteer. We don’t make enough money to even buy their vehicles.”

A Nexteer retiree added, “It’s about what the company wants, not what the people want. How can you work for a major company, and not earn enough to live?”

He said his nephew was a tier-two worker at Nexteer. “People want a quality lifestyle. Who wants to work

40-hours a week and not have a quality lifestyle? Instead you are in a survival mode. You want to be comfortable, not just surviving. You can't take a day off work or you fall behind."

"The UAW says this is the best contract we can get, they're going to close the shop, blah, blah," a young worker said. "Nexteer pays \$12 an hour. That's below the poverty rate for a 40-hour week. After they take union dues out it's down to \$330 a week. How do you pay your rent on that?"

"This company is making tons of money, especially with the electronic power steering replacing the hydraulic system. They are paying managers \$10,000 production bonuses but telling us we didn't hit our quotas."

"You got minimum wage workers in there employed by a temp agency to check parts and do the same work we do. With the wages they've negotiated for us it's like the UAW is operating its own cheap labor temp service—it's crooked as hell."

"When the unions were first built the principle was 'equal pay for equal work.' The two-tier system is ridiculous. I thought this contract was the turning point. If you can't improve wages when the company's making big profits, when can you? I guess never."

The economically ravaged landscape in Saginaw is testimony to decades of betrayals by the UAW and its sabotage of any struggle against job cuts and the relentless attacks on wages. The UAW has spent nearly four decades claiming concessions were necessary to "save" jobs, but not a single job has been saved.

The city and neighboring Buena Vista Township once hosted 12 GM plants related to transmissions, steering and metal casting, yet only one GM facility, the Grey Iron Foundry, remains. The Eaton auto parts plant, which once employed 5,000 workers, was closed six months after the UAW imposed a pay freeze on workers. It was demolished in 2008.

In nearby Flint, the birthplace of the UAW during the sit-down strikes of the 1930s, GM employment has fallen from a 1978 high of 80,000 to under 8,000 by 2010. The city is currently under a state of emergency due to high levels of lead in the water after years of tax cuts to GM have left Flint's infrastructure in a state of disrepair.

"I'm making less now than when I was hired in," a skilled worker said. "There are people who can't make their house payment or a pay for their car to get to work. GM and the UAW are in bed together. The UAW promotes the Democrats, but they are taking down the middle class just like the Republicans."

"I know a skilled tradesman with 10 years whose children qualify for reduced lunches because he doesn't earn enough. That's the government subsidizing this company. There was a pipefitter with 39 years who tried to get his pension from Nexteer and they told him the company was still owned by GM."

A young worker with less than two years said, "This contract is bogus. There is no guaranteed employment, and the raises are ridiculous for a company that made \$420 million in profits last year. We were stiff-armed and are getting teenager wages that are barely above McDonalds."

"You just can't satisfy greed. Wall Street gets bailed out and nothing happens to the criminals who crashed the economy. But if you jaywalk they'll lock you up. The Democrats and Republicans are all one party."

Hundreds of workers took copies of the *Autoworker Newsletter* from campaigners as they arrived to vote. Many expressed their support for the newsletter for telling them the truth. UAW officials, however, called the police against campaigners.

"The union officials said you were blocking traffic, but we said you were on public property and had the right to be there," said one worker who was opposed to the contract. "The UAW and the company have the same agenda. The UAW owns GM stock. We didn't even get the whole contract before we voted."

"The companies just change their names. Why would Nexteer keep the same executives around who ran Delphi into bankruptcy? Wouldn't you want new people? The executives got their mansions, and I'm making \$17 an hour. And the UAW is big money now too."



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