For a counteroffensive against the auto bosses!

A socialist-internationalist strategy for Canadian Detroit Three workers

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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* End two-tier and all job cuts and concessions!
* Build rank-and-file committees!
* Forge the fighting unity of North American auto workers!

With the contracts expiring September 19 at the Canadian operations of GM, Ford, and Fiat-Chrysler, Canadian auto workers face a decisive battle whose outcome will be critical for the whole working class.

Auto workers—as demonstrated by the massive strike vote—are determined to strike back after years of ever-expanding job cuts, concessions, and speed-up. But to mount a successful counteroffensive, workers must seize the leadership of their struggle from the pro-company Unifor apparatus and combine militant industrial action with a political strategy for the mobilization of working people across Canada and auto workers in the US, Mexico and around the world.

The transparent aim of the Detroit 3 automakers and their Unifor errand boys is to use the threat of plant closures in Oshawa, Brampton, and Windsor to extort further concessions, pitting workers in Canada against their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico, Europe and Asia in a race to the bottom.

Time and again, the threat of job losses has been used to blackmail workers, with the Canadian Auto Workers (now rebranded as Unifor) joining with the auto bosses to impose contracts that slash wages, shred benefits and gut work rules, and that have created an ever-expanding two- and even multi-tier, low-wage workforce. In 2009, CAW/Unifor collaborated with the automakers, the Obama administration, and the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments to “bail out” the automakers by slashing labor costs by $20 per hour. Three years later, CAW/Unifor agreed to contracts that extended a wage freeze for a further 4 years, eliminated COLA for retirees, and slashed the pay of new hires by a further $4 per hour to just $20, while extending the number of years that they need to work to earn the regular base wage from six to ten.

Contract after contract, the union has touted concessions as necessary to “save jobs,” but the list of shuttered plants only grows longer. Since 2000 the Detroit 3 have more than halved their production workforce in Canada, devastating auto-based communities.

This round of bargaining is no different. Unifor President Jerry Dias and his labor lieutenants are already downplaying expectations of any reversal of the years of givebacks, although the auto makers have been making money hand-over-fist. Workers have been kept almost entirely in the dark about contract goals, other than an insistence that new product investment must be announced.

In other words, the union once again intends to bamboozle and bully workers into accepting concessions, claiming that otherwise they will imperil the “investment guarantees” they have “won.” Unifor officials have already signaled their readiness to match the pension cuts they agreed to last year at the GM-owned CAMI plant in Ingersoll. And at Oshawa, they have given GM the green light (under a deal struck in 2013) to employ 500 workers, more than a fifth of the total workforce, as “Supplementary Workforce Employees,” with permanently lower wages and benefits significantly inferior even to those of two-tier workers.

For their part, the Detroit Three have arrogantly threatened to eliminate 7,000 jobs, almost a third of their Canadian workforce, unless their Canadian operations can be made “globally competitive,” i.e. can provide investors profits even bigger than those that they can squeeze from workers in the US and Mexico .

A determined stand by auto workers against concessions and job cuts would galvanize support from workers across Canada and internationally. But such a stand must be guided by a different and opposed strategy to the nationalist and corporatist strategy pursued by CAW/Unifor since it split from the United Auto Workers (UAW) in 1985.

Forge the unity of auto workers in North America and around the world

To defeat the globally organized auto companies and their systematic drive to extract ever-greater profits through whipsawing, Canadian auto workers must consciously ally and coordinate their struggle with their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and across the globe.

This means reviving and developing the militant traditions that led Canadian workers in 1937 to support the insurrectionary Flint sit-down strike and join in the building of the UAW—traditions that were later betrayed and trampled on by the well-heeled union

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bureaucrats on both sides of the border.

In 1985, the CAW leadership justified its split from the UAW by pointing to the reactionary, pro-company policies of the union's leadership. But far from constituting a genuine opposition to concessions, the split was a reactionary maneuver that facilitated the companies' attempts to pit workers against each other.

For the past three decades, the UAW and CAW have competed with one another as to which can better "defend American" or "Canadian jobs" by offering the automakers the bigger returns. This has gone hand in hand with their ever-deeper integration into management—a collaboration exemplified in Unifor's case by its participation in the Canadian Automotive Partnership Council, a government-industry-union body aimed at boosting the profitability of the corporations.

Workers' needs must not be subordinated to investor profit

Unifor, the UAW and the unions have proven incapable of defending the most elementary interests of the working class, because they are nationalist, pro-capitalist organizations that accept that workers' jobs and wages must be subordinated to the profits of investors.

Due to modern technology, labor is far more productive than even three decades ago, yet the conditions of life for working people grow ever more difficult. If the billionaire capitalists who control the economy can't provide workers with a decent wage and basic social rights—and they clearly can't and won't—then the working class must advance its own program to radically reorganize the economy on the basis of social need, not private profit.

Build rank-and-file committees

Unifor can't be pressured into acting in its workers' interests. It is a bureaucratic apparatus, which functions ever more completely as an arm of management in suppressing worker opposition. That's why, when Ontario Progressive Conservative leader Tim Hudak proposed to introduce reactionary US style "right to work" laws, the automakers successfully prevailed on him to drop the proposal, saying they didn't want to see their "partnership" with the union disrupted

Dias' bluster about a possible strike is a fraud. Despite the automakers' relentless concession demands, CAW/Unifor has not called a single day of job action against any of the Detroit 3 since 1996. In the unlikely event the union does sanction a walkout, it will be a stunt aimed at siphoning off rising rank-and-file anger, the better to push through a sell-out agreement.

Last year, US auto workers rebelled against the UAW bureaucracy, voting down a concessionary agreement at Fiat-Chrysler, but the union was ultimately able to ram through sell-out agreements, using a series of blatantly antidemocratic and unconstitutional maneuvers.

To prevent Unifor from sabotaging their struggle, auto workers must build new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers and committed to defending workers' social rights, not the profits of the corporations. These rank-and-file committees should take the lead in organizing industry-wide strike action, fighting to rally US and Mexican auto workers and workers across Canada in a common struggle against all concessions, job cuts and the dismantling of public services.

The fight against the auto bosses is a political struggle

The entire political establishment from the Conservatives and Liberals through the NDP were united in 2008-9 in insisting that any auto industry "bailout" must be at the expense of workers in the form of unprecedented wage and benefit concessions.

Similarly, any challenge by auto workers to the decades of givebacks would immediately bring them into a head-on collision with all the institutions of big business—their political parties, the government, the police and the entire state machinery that upholds capitalist exploitation and social inequality.

The hostility of the CAW/Unifor to the interests of the workers it purports to represent finds consummate expression in its ever-tighter embrace of the big-business Liberals over the past two decades. The union has been a key backer of the Ontario Liberal government that has imposed savage social spending cuts, privatized Hydro One, and illegalized teacher strikes, and it has equally close ties to the Trudeau government, which is no less committed to austerity and war than its Conservative predecessor.

To defeat big business, workers need their own party—not a sham "labour party" like the pro-capitalist NDP—but a socialist party that has as its aim the establishment of a workers' government. Such a government would place basic industry and the banks under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class so as to guarantee for all secure and well-paying jobs, quality health care, education, a comfortable retirement, and a future for the next generation free from poverty and war.

Auto workers face powerful enemies, but they have even more powerful allies in the working class across Canada and around the world.

Auto workers who want to build rank-and-file committees to organize the long overdue working-class counteroffensive should contact the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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