

SEP presidential candidate speaks with Canadian autoworkers about contract battle

Our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) US presidential candidate Jerry White spoke with autoworkers at the Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) minivan assembly plant in Windsor, Canada on Monday afternoon. The campaign visit came just hours before the contract expiration for some 23,500 General Motors (GM), Ford and FCA workers at factories across Canada.

Canadian workers were surprised to meet a candidate for US president at the plant gates. However, they gave White a warm reception as he explained that the SEP was fighting to unite workers internationally against the global attack on wages and the danger of war.

“What are you doing here if you’re running against Clinton and Trump?” one worker asked, but then gave a thumbs-up to White when he said he was “fighting to unite workers on both sides of the border in a common struggle to defend jobs and living standards.”

Despite the repeated claims by the union Unifor that concessionary contracts would save jobs, GM, Ford and Chrysler have halved production in Canada, wiping out thousands of jobs and devastating working-class communities. Once again, however, Unifor President Jerry Dias is offering givebacks, supposedly to keep production from moving “south of the border.”

FCA workers denounced this bankrupt policy. “The way the union is now,” one worker said, “the last three contracts made promises of new vehicles, but the companies pulled back each time and cut jobs anyway.”

The Windsor minivan plant, originally built in 1929, employs nearly 6,000 workers, including large numbers of younger, lower-paid second-tier workers. FCA, which made \$410 million in profits last year, has also made no commitment to keep open its Brampton, Ontario plant, with 3,556 workers.

Similar threats have been made by GM to workers at

its giant Oshawa plant, outside of Toronto, once the largest assembly complex in North America, turning out more than 900,000 vehicles annually and employing more than 11,000 people. Today there are only 2,400 hourly workers left. Production of the Camaro was shifted to Lansing, Michigan last year. GM closed its Windsor transmission plant in 2010, wiping out 1,400 jobs.

If the Ford Windsor and Essex engine plants—which employ 1,300 workers—are to remain open, Unifor would have to agree to a “competitive labor agreement” that can overcome the challenges of operating in a high-cost country, a Ford of Canada senior executive threatened earlier this year. “Having a competitive agreement is the price of entry for consideration for sourcing an investment,” the executive said, “We’re always looking to expand in Canada ... But we have no product identified for Windsor.”

Workers must organize an international struggle because the transnational auto giants are pitting workers around the world in a race to the bottom, White explained. Corporate executives like FCA boss Sergio Marchionne have a global strategy. The economic nationalism of the unions, whether Unifor in Canada or the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the United States, serves to divide and weaken the international working class.

White explained that the ceaseless promotion of nationalism also played into the hands of the ruling classes as they prepared for new wars over the control of resources, markets and cheap labor.

“If the companies have an international strategy,” a veteran autoworker said, “we should have one too. Instead we compete against each other over wages and work standards. And we know how wars work.”

US and Canadian workers fought joint battles to organize the UAW against the violent resistance of the auto bosses in the 1930s and 1940s. With advent of globalization, however, the nationalist union bureaucracies abandoned any struggle to unify the working class throughout North America as they transformed themselves into arms of corporate management.

The Canadian section of the UAW split off in 1985, claiming there was a “Canadian road” to defending autoworkers. Over the last three decades, Unifor (formerly the Canadian Auto Workers) and the UAW have competed against each other to entice the Detroit Three automakers to locate production in their respective countries by suppressing the opposition of rank-and-file workers to a relentless driving down of labor costs. An entire generation of younger autoworkers have been brought into the plants at substandard wages and benefits and with little or no job security.

A younger, second-tier worker told White, “We make \$20 an hour while the senior workers make \$35. I’m bringing home \$35,000 a year before taxes, and the high-end Pacifica minivans we make sell for \$55,000.

“Whether it’s Clinton or Trump there in the United States, they are all for the 1 percent, not us. But the rich own the banks and the government, how are we going to take them on and change it?”

When White asked her who makes all the wealth, she replied, “the working class.” White then said it was the working class that had to be mobilized independently of all the capitalist parties: the Democrats and Republicans in the US, the Tories, Liberals and New Democrats in the Canada. “We have to build a mass political and socialist movement of the working class,” White said, “to unite workers internationally against war, oppression, inequality. These factories should belong to the working class, not the capitalists.”

White told workers that last year, autoworkers in the US rebelled against the UAW and defeated the first union-backed national contract in three decades. White denounced the UAW for refusing to pledge not to scab on a strike by Canadian workers and said the SEP was fighting to unify autoworkers in the US, Canada, Mexico and throughout the world against the globally-organized auto giants and the world capitalist system.

Like their brothers and sisters in the US, White said,

workers in Canada had to form rank-and-file committees take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands and fight to mobilize the broadest support among workers and youth. This meant rejecting the nationalism and pro-capitalist policies of Unifor and their anti-working class alliance with the Liberal Party and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau who was given a hero’s welcome at last month’s Unifor national convention.



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