

# Unifor blocks strike at GM Canada

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Half an hour past the midnight deadline for a strike against General Motors Canada, Unifor President Jerry Dias announced the union had reached a “framework for a tentative agreement” that would prevent a walkout by nearly 4,000 GM workers.

Surrounded by fellow union executives and with a backdrop reading, “invest in Canada,” Dias said the four-year deal “had turned the tide” of job cuts in Canada and won “tens of millions of dollars in new investments.” This included new product commitments, he said, for GM’s giant Oshawa plant outside of Toronto, an engine plant in St. Catherines and a parts distribution facility in Woodstock.

As every autoworker knows, however, whatever “job security” promises are made are not worth the paper they are printed on. Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, have repeatedly announced such deals—based on ever-greater concessions—only to see automotive employment in Canada halved since 2000. At GM alone, the numbers have fallen from 19,000 in 2002 to 3,900.

While giving few if any details of the agreement—which in fact is not a contract but the “framework” for one—Dias did admit that Unifor had given up defined benefit pensions for new hires, an achievement won through generations of struggle by autoworkers. The hated two-tier wage system will also remain in place. The “Grow In” period—until a worker reaches top pay scale—appears to remain at ten years but new hires will start at a slightly higher wage.

Dias said some 700 formerly part-time employees would be transitioned to full-time positions but did not say what pay and benefit rate they would receive. He did not mention if GM will still use a third tier “supplementary workforce,” which currently consists of 500 employees.

It is likely that even more local concessions were accepted to “save” the Oshawa, St. Catherines and

Woodstock facilities. Dias boasted, for example, that Unifor had convinced GM to shift some of its engine work from Mexico to the St. Catherines plant. In the past, he said, the auto companies had shifted production from Canada to Mexico to seek lower wages, now, Dias said, Unifor Local 199 had accepted a package that was “reversing the trend.”

Dias also gave no details on plans to offer buyouts to thousands of higher-paid veteran workers in order to make room for new lower-paid workers. He boasted that after the 2012 contract—which introduced “hybrid” pensions (part defined benefit, part defined contribution)—Ford had hired 2,200 more workers. The elimination of defined benefit pensions is based on a separate deal Unifor cut with GM’s CAMI (Canada Automotive Manufacturing Inc.) facility in Ingersoll, Ontario.

While claiming that the deal meant there would be no closure of the Oshawa facility in 2019, he added that the Consolidated Line—with some 900-1000 jobs—would be closed in 2017 at the plant regardless.

Well aware that he will face widespread opposition to the sellout deal from rank-and-file workers, Dias said he did not want to get into any more “economics” until union officials meet with the membership. The ratification vote is scheduled for Sunday giving workers little or no time to study the details of what he admits is “hundreds of pages” of a deal that is still not a contract. He nevertheless said the entire bargaining committee had endorsed the package.

GM workers voted overwhelmingly to endorse strike action earlier this summer and have repeatedly made clear that as the automakers rake in record profits, they expect improvement to their wages, which have remained frozen for ten years, and working conditions.

While counting on Unifor to push through such a rotten deal, General Motors also relied on the United Auto Workers in the United States to undermine the

impact of a potential strike. GM plants in the US are reportedly running at 80 percent and could run on increased capacity in case of a strike. Last week UAW leader Dennis Williams bluntly refused to give any assurances that he would not order US workers to take up the slack.

For decades, Unifor and its predecessor, the CAW, have worked hand-in-glove with management to ram one concessions contract after another down the throats of autoworkers. Canadian autoworkers have not had a wage rise in a decade and their benefits have been repeatedly curtailed to boost GM's bottom line.

This has been the disastrous outcome for autoworkers of CAW/Unifor's pro-capitalist and nationalist perspective, which reached its high point in 1985 when the CAW and UAW split along national lines, dividing autoworkers in North America. Over the more than three decades since, management on both sides of the border have exploited these divisions to drive down wages and wrench further concessions from American and Canadian workers with the full collaboration of the union bureaucrats.

Dias and his fellow union bureaucrats have no intention of fighting for the interests of rank-and-file members. They represent a privileged section of the middle class whose interests are bound up with protecting their perks and positions on joint company committees and deepening their already cozy relations with the big business political parties, above all the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau.

Last week, the Liberal government announced it was changing the terms of a low-interest loan programme to provide more handouts to the automakers. The funds will now be offered as grants, a gesture welcomed by Dias as a positive step.

Autoworkers at GM and the other Detroit three automakers should recall the treacherous role played by the UAW during last year's contract talks in the US. After failing to bully Fiat Chrysler workers into accepting a miserable concessions-laden deal, the UAW refused to call a strike and instead ordered workers to vote on a similar agreement a week later.

At GM, despite the opposition of skilled trades workers to the new contract, the UAW rode roughshod over its own constitution to impose the deal. At Ford, those opposed to the new agreement were in the majority until the last day of voting, when amid

credible charges of vote rigging, the UAW announced a majority in favour had been achieved thanks to an improbable landslide vote in support of the contract at the last plant.

Dias responded to this by praising UAW leader Dennis Williams to the skies as an "incredible leader."

Canadian autoworkers are increasingly relying on the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* to cut through the double-talk of the union bureaucrats. As one Canadian autoworker remarked last week, "This Newsletter is amazing. It articulates what brothers are feeling on the floor when dealing with even the smallest issues. Leadership has been hi-jacked by the hand that feeds them. Self-serving union leaders are disguising their true motivation to take what they can while they can. It's sickened the work force. 'Solidarity' is simply the word of the day. I hope I can share your information with as many brothers and sisters as I can. These messages need to be blasted from the mountain tops for all to hear and understand."

If their struggle is not to be defeated, GM autoworkers must act urgently to seize control of the struggle from the union bureaucrats. Independent action committees should be established in the plants to prepare a campaign to defeat the sellout deal and expand the struggle by appealing for support from their colleagues at Ford and Fiat Chrysler, and the thousands of jobs in the auto parts sector reliant on the auto plants. These action committees must seek to coordinate their struggles with autoworkers in the United States, Mexico and internationally, all of whom confront the same ruthless assault on their working conditions by the corporate bosses.

Above all, this requires a decisive break from the treacherous nationalist and pro-capitalist politics of Unifor and the union bureaucracy as a whole. We urge autoworkers at GM who agree with this perspective and want to take the struggle forward to contact the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*.



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