

Unifor president jeered by hundreds at Oshawa meeting

GM Canada workers narrowly approve sellout deal

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In a Sunday night press release, Unifor announced that its “pattern” contract for autoworkers at GM Canada passed by narrow margins. Sixty-four percent of production workers and 56.5 percent of skilled trades voted to ratify the dubiously named “framework” deal. About 4,000 workers were eligible to vote on the four-year agreement at Oshawa’s assembly facilities, the St. Catherines engine plant and a small parts-supply depot in Woodstock, Ontario.

Union President Jerry Dias, who had waged a year-long campaign to convince autoworkers that they had to accept any contract placed before them or risk losing their jobs, did his best to hide the union’s undoubted concern at the narrow passage of the deal and the reception it will now get at Fiat-Chrysler and then Ford as the miserable pattern is spun out to the other auto companies.

“The gains made in this agreement are historic”, said Dias. “And more than has been achieved in the past ten years.” Many hundreds of GM workers saw things differently. Indeed, thousands would have wondered what exactly they were voting on.

At ratification meetings held Sunday, despite demands by workers to see the full contents of the will-of-the-wisp “framework” deal, Unifor refused and instead produced a small brochure featuring purported “highlights” of the rotten agreement that was handed out to members as they entered the meeting venues. So anxious was the union officialdom to get the vote underway that in Oshawa, voting stations were opened even before the union began its presentation of the contract to the membership.

In fact, workers were not even voting on a finalized contract. Dias, attending the first of the three

ratification meetings in Oshawa on Sunday morning, pompously strode to the podium accompanied by great musical fanfare to announce and endorse, not a contract, but a simple—as he put it—“framework for a tentative agreement”. As the meeting wore on, workers took to the microphones to denounce the union for its double-talk, secrecy and arrogance.

Dias had insisted that the contract “fight” at GM Canada would be over maintaining the company’s footprint in the country. With almost 800 jobs on Oshawa’s Consolidated Line set to end in 2017 and with no new models assigned to that city’s Flex Line after 2019, Dias triumphantly claimed last week at his late-night strike deadline press conference that his bargaining team had saved 2,500 Oshawa jobs and guaranteed new investment at St. Catherines. The “framework” had provided, he stated, \$400 million in capital investment for Oshawa and \$150 million for St. Catherines.

Workers, however, who were provided similar “guarantees” at a 2007 contract ratification meeting, only to see GM announce the wholesale closure of Oshawa’s Truck Plant just months later, demanded more details. When pressed on the actual details of the “new work” coming to Oshawa, Dias and his colleagues on the podium were unable to give a straight answer. The company “predicted” that 70,000 to 90,000 units would be shifted to Oshawa.

Is this simply overflow? How many units per shift, asked one worker. “We don’t have the figures yet,” was the response from the podium.

What about hiring? The company “figures” they’ll be hiring by mid-2018, was all Unifor could claim. What about skilled trades? The Local Bargaining

Committee's one-page release simply stated, "No skilled trades will be on layoff once the investment is in full swing." Such was the nature of these ghostly "job guarantees."

Dias' utter contempt for the membership was on full display during several exchanges with speakers from the floor. When a body shop electrician grilled Dias about details of the so-called product commitment, Dias denounced the worker. "You work for us," responded the electrician, to great applause from the thousand-strong gathering. "You're an idiot," responded Dias. At which point the meeting exploded into loud jeering and calls to "Go back to the bargaining table," "Turn it down," "Where's the hundred-page document?" and "It's a bullshit contract." Such was the outpouring of rage from the membership that Dias felt it politic to deliver a terse apology.

Another worker, concerned that he was being forced to vote on a veritable pig-in-a-poke, asked if the membership was lawfully allowed to view the contract. So divorced from the membership's concerns were the assembled bureaucrats on the stage that no one could understand the question. The worker repeated, "Do we lawfully have the right to view the contract?" At which point, an official responded, "polls have been open for an hour." Calls from the floor to answer the question were ignored.

The "economic package" presented to the membership, after suffering through a ten-year wage freeze and massive give-backs on benefits—and after GM has made money hand over fist since it was bailed out with almost \$11 billion in 2009—was derisory.

Veteran workers will receive a paltry 2 percent wage raise upon ratification, then another two-year wage freeze followed by another 2 percent in 2019. The four percent raise over the life of the agreement amounts to a real wage cut when even the current historic low inflation rates of 1.2 to 1.8 percent are factored into the equation. Quarterly cost-of-living allowances are to be suspended again until June 2020. A lump sum payment of \$6,000 will be paid in installments through December 2019. There will be a \$6,000 signing bonus.

New hires will start at a slightly enhanced rate—43 cents an hour in the first year—escalating to full pay after ten years. The ten year "grow-in" period institutionalizes the two-tier system in all but name.

700 third tier Supplementary Workforce Employees (SWE's) will be allowed to enter the pay grid as full time, first year new hires.

In a major attack overturning rights won by workers in bitter struggle, all new hires will be stripped of the last vestiges of a hybrid defined-benefits pension system and be reduced to the inferior and unreliable defined contributions system.

Both the Detroit Three auto bosses and the Unifor bureaucrats are well aware that there is enormous opposition among workers to the deal. Unifor will now proceed to Fiat-Chrysler to bargain a new contract. Resistance must be mounted, but this requires that workers take the initiative by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of Unifor and opposed to its subordination of workers to the profit dictates of the auto companies, Bay Street and its political representatives in all the mainstream political parties.

The WSWS urges workers to begin forming such committees at FCA and Ford now, to block Unifor's efforts to ram through the "pattern" sellout agreement there. Workers should insist on the right to have the contract for several weeks before any vote is held. They must reject the crumbs being tossed their way in the economic package. The committees should establish lines of communication—between different plants and between auto workers and other sections of the working class throughout Canada, in the United States and internationally—to begin a working-class offensive against the auto bosses and the entire ruling class.



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