

“If they bring back the same contract as GM we are going to reject it”

Unifor sets stage for Fiat-Chrysler sellout

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In the wake of the narrow ratification vote at General Motors Canada late last month of a concession-laden sellout deal, Unifor President Jerry Dias told reporters last week that both Fiat-Chrysler (FCA) and Ford management have balked at the pattern settlement seeking even more givebacks from workers. FCA is the current target for negotiations with an October 10 deadline. Ford then follows.

According to Dias, the main sticking point is the modest increases in the pay-grid for new hires over their 10-year “grow-in” period. It is estimated that there are currently 1,700 second-tier workers at FCA and another 2,200 at Ford. In the GM “framework” agreement, new hires will receive a slightly enhanced wage increase—43 cents an hour in the first year—slowly escalating to full pay after 10 years.

Dias’ statement to the press raises some interesting questions. Unifor (and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers—CAW) have always insisted on a media blackout in the run-up to negotiation deadlines on the specific details of bargaining. Press releases seldom go beyond generalities like, “We are optimistic for a settlement,” “We continue to work hard for a deal” or “We remain far apart.” That Dias would choose to release particular information on management’s demands speaks to the union bureaucracy’s nervousness about the real possibility that the eventual deal placed before FCA and Ford workers runs the risk of outright rejection.

What better way to prepare the ground for another fake claim of “historic” contract victory than to say, “Look, we saved your two-tier increase.” After all, this was the *modus operandi* in the just-concluded GM negotiations. In presenting a deal—albeit a “framework,” not even finalized contract—that claimed that certain “overflow” shipments of half-finished bodies from American plants would save jobs in Oshawa, Dias crowed that his bargaining team had stood up to GM and won.

GM workers, not even sure on what exactly they were voting (only self-serving contract “highlights” were ever presented to them), passed the deal by the lowest margin in CAW/Unifor Detroit Three history. Overall, only 64.7 percent approved the framework. At the St. Catharines engine plant, a razor-thin majority of 54 percent accepted the deal.

The agreement was horrendous. Unifor left the 10-year two-tier system intact and negotiated the destruction of the last vestiges of a defined-benefit pension plan for new hires. In addition, the broader “economic package” presented to the membership, after suffering through a 10-year wage freeze and massive givebacks on benefits—and after GM made money hand over fist since it was bailed out with almost \$11 billion in 2009—was derisory.

Veteran workers received a paltry 2 percent wage raise upon ratification, then another two-year wage freeze followed by another 2 percent raise in 2019. The 4 percent increase 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 taxable payment of \$6,000 will be paid in installments through December 2019. There will be a taxable \$6,000 signing bonus. Retirees, once again, get virtually nothing.

Also noteworthy about Dias’ statement on FCA and Ford push-back on the GM pattern is the fact that whilst GM workers have yet to see a copy of the “framework agreement,” there is no doubt that FCA and Ford management has. One can be assured that, unlike Detroit Three autoworkers in Canada, corporate management teams will be studying more than mere contract “highlights.”

The continued refusal of Unifor to commit to providing autoworkers with a full copy of any tentative agreement and ample time to study its contents before voting demonstrates not only the miserable nature of the GM pattern but the utter contempt Dias and his bargaining teams have for rank-and-file workers. Of course, workers will not soon forget Dias’ provocative denunciation of a GM worker opposed to the deal at last month’s Oshawa ratification meeting as “an idiot.”

Workers at FCA and Ford plants in Canada have voiced strong opposition to the rotten terms already announced at GM and continue the demand begun with their brothers and sisters at General Motors that they see a full copy of any tentative contract. They have created their own rank-and-file Facebook pages to organize resistance to an expected union sellout.

But workers who turn to Unifor's official AutoTalks 2016 Facebook page will learn, from a recent posting by Gary Martin—a GM bargaining committee rep—that workers shouldn't receive advance copies of any contract. After all, "not everyone can interpret contractual changes," and anyway, such a deal would advantage the "No" vote because "members that either cannot understand the changes or are not completely satisfied are the only members that show up to the ratification meeting and vote no... so have faith in the union officials you elected as they all do their very best for their members."

What hogwash. For Unifor, it is only ill-informed workers or malcontents who could possibly see things differently than the union officialdom.

Veteran workers at Ford Oakville will be quite conversant with this arrogance. When workers there in 2008—and for the first time in the union's history—voted by 56 percent to reject a massive concessions-laden contract secretly negotiated by then-CAW President Buzz Hargrove five months before the contract deadline, the full weight of the union bureaucracy was mobilized to discredit the Oakville rebellion.

Local 707 President Gary Beck remarked that workers were just selfish and "didn't see outside of what's going on at our plant." Hargrove joined Beck in dismissing the "No" vote. According to Hargrove, "[I]t was just one of those situations where a handful of people got control of the mikes early and shifted the mood." That next to no one at the raucous ratification meeting from outside the union officialdom spoke in favour of the agreement only fanned Hargrove's anger.

"Mistruths and distortions" were spread by malcontents, Hargrove insisted. For his own part, then-Windsor Ford local President Mike Vince welcomed the overriding of the Oakville rejection by votes from St. Thomas and Windsor. "We're going to put ourselves in a good position in Ford Motor Company's mind," he cooed.

"If they bring back the same contract as GM, we are going to reject it," a veteran worker at the FCA minivan plant in Windsor, Ontario told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. "Why should we give up pensions and wages for some promises they aren't going to keep anyway?"

"At Plant #6 Chrysler put investments in and then they turned around and closed the paint shop cutting 2,000 jobs," said another Windsor worker.

"We want fairness," said a young second-tier worker. "There should be no tiers and our wages should be equal."

Supporters of the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* also campaigned last week at FCA's truck plant in Warren, Michigan and raised the fight now being waged in the Canadian plants.

Last year, US autoworkers rebelled against the UAW and defeated the first UAW-FCA contract by a two-to-one margin. This was the first rejection of a UAW-backed national contract in three decades. Rank-and-file workers used social media to organize opposition and circulated and re-circulated copies of

the *Autoworker Newsletter*, which became the voice of workers and the center of the opposition.

A young second-tier worker offered this advice: "Canadian workers should read the contract close so you know what is going on. In 2015 they pulled the wool over our eyes. The highlights they presented were not in depth. I'm all in favor of a united fight by workers in Canada and the United States. They shouldn't be pitting workers against each other. It makes things worse. If we all work for the same companies, we should all be together."

A worker with 23 years of experience then chimed in. "We still haven't found out the full details of our contract. Canadian workers have to say 'no' until they get the full contract details."

Even setting aside expected givebacks and freezes, workers should reject the pattern deal soon to be foisted at FCA and then Ford on straight principle. It is impossible for workers to make an informed vote without at least two weeks to study the full contract and organize meetings of the rank-and-file, independent of the union bureaucrats, to review and debate its provisions.

Everything depends on the independent initiative of rank-and-file workers themselves. In this fight, the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* will provide all the assistance possible. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* will hold an information call-in meeting to organize the fight to unite autoworkers in Canada and the US against all job cuts and concessions on Wednesday, October 5 at 7:00 pm Eastern Time. To participate, dial 438-800-2937 in Canada and 213-416-1560 in the US and enter PIN 581 991 086#.



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