

Unifor prepares pattern sellout for Ford Canada workers

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In the midst of continuing opposition amongst Ford Canada autoworkers to the concessionary pattern settlements rammed through over the past month at General Motors (GM) and Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles (FCA), Unifor President Jerry Dias has once again defended both rotten deals and set the stage for the imposition of a similar agreement at Ford.

Ford management, Dias claims, is resisting changes to the 10-year grow-in wage package for newly hired workers proposed by Unifor. Dias made a similar claim only weeks ago in the course of negotiations with FCA. This assertion is a transparent attempt by Dias to present the contract negotiations as an adversarial relationship. In fact the whole contract process is a conspiracy between the auto bosses and Unifor to attack the jobs, wages and working conditions of autoworkers.

Unifor (and its immediate 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 Ford management’s position, as it did preciously in talks with FCA, speaks to the union bureaucracy’s fear that workers rightly suspect that the entire process is rigged against them.

The changes proposed by Unifor allow new hires to receive a slightly enhanced wage increase—43 cents an hour in the first year—slowly rising to full pay after 10 years. The deal, in effect, institutionalizes the hated two-tier system, initially billed by the CAW leadership as a temporary measure to weather the 2008-2009 global economic crisis.

The economic package presented to GM and FCA

workers was derisory. This after workers suffered through a 10-year wage freeze and massive givebacks on benefits under conditions where both companies have made money hand over fist since they were bailed out with almost \$14 billion in government money in 2009.

The 4 percent raise over the life of the four-year agreement contained in both settlements amounts to a real wage cut even when the current historic low inflation rates are factored into the equation. Quarterly cost-of-living allowances are to be suspended again until June 2020. A fully taxable lump sum payment of \$6,000 will be paid in installments through December 2019. There will be a taxable \$6,000 signing bonus offered with the aim of bribing hard-pressed workers for an immediate ratification.

Any semblance of a defined benefit pension for new hires will be abandoned, to be replaced with a defined contributions scheme tied to the stock market and with a mandatory 4 percent paycheck deduction.

In the wake of the GM sellout last month, Ford Oakville Local President Dave Thomas released a statement opposing the GM-FCA pattern. His opposition is entirely demagogic. Thomas sat on the 2012 Ford CAW bargaining committee that recommended ratification of a concessions deal that extended the grow-in from six to 10 years. At the same time, his statement reflects the unease of a section of the Unifor leadership that fears Dias may be losing control.

Due to increases in hiring at the giant Ford Oakville assembly complex beginning in 2013, almost half of the 5,000-strong workforce fall into the 10-year grow-in grid. This has likely added to the unease among workers at Oakville over the institutionalization of the two-tier system contained in the FCA-GM pattern

agreements.

Thomas' statements immediately drew the ire of Dias and Ford Master Bargaining Chair Chris Taylor from Ford Windsor Local 200. Rejecting the GM pattern, said Taylor, would be "short-sighted".

Taylor went on to state, "I think Oakville understands clearly that our position is very precarious to say the least, just as it was at their site when they lost the Windstar and truck plant. As a local president, you have to do what's right on behalf of our members, but you have to do what's best for the industry."

Taylor, however, neglected to mention that the series of concession contracts forced down the throats of autoworkers over the years only "did best" for the auto companies. These contracts were enforced in Canada by the CAW/Unifor, and in the US by the United Auto Workers, all of which pitted workers against each other along national lines and even plant-by-plant in a race to the bottom.

Backtracking on his earlier claim to oppose the pattern agreement, last week, Thomas told the *Windsor Star* that his Oakville local would not oppose any final agreement presented by the Ford Master Bargaining Committee. "It's a very difficult set of negotiations that we're entering into. I'd like to focus on solidarity, not a battle between two locals." And, then more imperiously, "If I recommend a collective agreement to my membership, they will ratify".

The verbiage employed by Thomas mirrors a statement he gave after the ratification of the GM "framework" agreement. Then, the Local 707 president was at pains to avoid criticism of the sellout at GM. "The members at GM," wrote Thomas, "were in a very difficult position especially in Oshawa with no future investment planned for that site. GM's [union] leadership had some very difficult decisions to make and they believe they did what was best for their members."

Thomas has a long record of negotiating concession deals. In 2012 Thomas and the rest of the Unifor bargaining committee called for the ratification of a miserable contract that once again froze wages, ended pensioners' cost-of-living allowance and almost doubled the grow-in time for new hires.

For his part Dias speaks openly as a labour contractor. He bragged last spring that "about two-thirds of unionized workers at the Oshawa plants are

eligible to retire under the provisions of the Unifor contract with GM. This will save General Motors billions." Of course, the "billions" saved will be at the expense of the thousands of new hires who are entering the plants with not only massively compromised pension benefits, but significantly lower wage and benefit packages.

As Dias went on to explain, "If those workers retire, they can be replaced by newly hired employees who start at \$20.50 per hour and whose wages won't rise to the full seniority level of \$34 an hour until they have been there for 10 years."

The opposition expressed by workers at Ford to Unifor's pattern agreement demonstrates the readiness of autoworkers to mount a counteroffensive against the auto bosses. But if they are to wage a successful fight against all job cuts and concessions, abolition of two-tier wages, and restoration of decent wages, benefits, pensions and working conditions, autoworkers must break politically and organizationally from the nationalist, pro-capitalist Unifor.

Autoworkers should build rank-and-file committees independent of the Unifor apparatus to spearhead an industry-wide strike and fight to rally workers in the US and Mexico in a united struggle to assert the common interests of all workers for decent jobs and pay. This must be combined with a political struggle to mobilize the working class independently of the big business liberals and New Democratic Party based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

In this fight, the *World Socialist Web Site* Autoworker Newsletter will offer every possible assistance.



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