

Canada: Unifor scuttles strike at Integram Seating plant in matter of hours

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In a snap vote late Monday afternoon on a Unifor-endorsed contract little changed from the one they had rejected the day before, workers at the Integram Seating auto parts plant in Windsor, Ontario, voted 86 percent in favour of acceptance.

Most of the provisions of the sell-out contract were left untouched from the one they had rejected little more than 24 hours before, including the further entrenching of the hated two-tier system. But workers leaving the ratification voting reported that the signing bonus had been increased from \$1,000 to \$3,500 before taxes and a fifty cents per hour benefits co-pay requirement withdrawn for new hires. Earlier on Monday, Unifor had abruptly ended a brief eleven-hour strike, forcing the workers to return to their jobs, even before having a chance to vote on the new agreement.

Those who could and did show up for the second vote and opted to ratify—many were unable even to attend as production continued unabated at the plant Monday afternoon—clearly saw that the Unifor union leadership had done everything possible to sabotage their industrial action from the outset and was determined to prevent any challenge to the low-wage two-tier system.

Integram is a holding of the giant multinational parts supplier Magna International. The company provides “just-in-time” seat and component deliveries to Fiat-Chrysler’s Windsor Assembly plant and to General Motors’ CAMI assembly facility in nearby Ingersoll, Ontario. There are one thousand workers at the plant. Magna has steadily recorded huge profits since the global government bailouts of the banks and auto companies in 2009-2010. Only last week it announced a third-quarter profit increase of some 15 percent.

Integram workers walked off the job Sunday afternoon after rejecting with a majority of 58 percent a tentative agreement unanimously recommended by Unifor Local 444 officials. The workers, many of them new hires

earning a paltry \$17.33 per hour and growing in to only \$24.76 in the eleventh year of service, opposed a deal that not only cemented the two-tier system but increased their payments into the benefits plan and included a meagre general wage “rise” that barely keeps up with inflation.

Visibly angered by the workers’ defiance, the Local 444 leadership went into overdrive to end the strike. At 3:30 AM Monday, Local 444 President Dino Chiodo announced a new agreement had been reached. He immediately instructed pickets to withdraw so as to allow vital parts shipments for GM CAMI to leave the plant, ordered morning shift workers to report for duty, and arranged for a snap re-vote for Monday afternoon.

The whole sordid affair is an object lesson in the utter subservience of Unifor to the auto companies. Unions today act not as fighters to improve the living standards of their members but rather as junior partners of management that seek to increase corporate profitability and smother workers’ resistance.

If the Integram workers were able to buttress their original signing bonus, it was only due to their rejection of the union-recommended initial deal.

The events over this weekend provide plenty of evidence, if more was ever needed, on the role of trade unions today.

Only two weeks ago, Integram workers returned a massive 99.2 percent strike mandate for their bargaining team. At the time, Local 444 Vice-President Doug Boughner promised the membership that although he wanted to do everything possible to avoid a work stoppage, Unifor would call a strike if there was no deal by the November 3 11:59 PM strike deadline.

That was a lie. With workers chomping at the bit to down tools, the strike deadline quietly passed. It was only six hours later, on Friday morning, that the union announced that a tentative agreement had been reached with a ratification vote scheduled for Sunday.

And when the workers rejected that agreement, Chiodo singled out younger workers for their opposition and readiness to strike at the midnight deadline, adding arrogantly, “There’s a lot of education that has to happen.”

For the Unifor officialdom, the work stoppage was not viewed as an opportunity for workers to fight for better pay and conditions, but as an obstacle to the maintenance of the union’s close relations with corporate management, which relies on Unifor to enforce its dictates against the workers it claims to represent.

Clearly annoyed by the worker’s temerity to vote down a deal recommended by his team of bureaucrats and speaking like a corporate executive, Chiodo vowed to do all he could to keep the strike as weak and as brief as possible. “This is definitely a challenge for us,” he told the *Windsor Star*. “We will set up meetings [with the company] as quickly as we can to try to figure out how we can mitigate any type of losses.”

With GM CAMI facing downtime should the plant go for only two shifts without parts and Windsor FCA impacted by next week, Chiodo sought to blame striking Integram workers—not the miserly contract offer—for disrupting autoworkers’ jobs at GM and Fiat-Chrysler. “If we are on strike long, we’re not only affecting General Motors but we’re affecting the Windsor Assembly Plant,” he complained. “And you’re talking about affecting another 6,000 workers here in Windsor and another 3,000 or 3,500 workers at the CAMI facility and that just has detrimental effects for everyone.”

In actuality, the combative stand taken by Integram workers was welcomed by autoworkers employed by the Detroit Three companies—GM, Fiat-Chrysler and Ford—in the wake of consecutive sell-out agreements that Unifor rammed through over the past month.

Unifor saw historic low support for its Detroit Three agreements. At GM St. Catharines, the deal barely squeaked through whilst at Ford Oakville, workers voted down the sell-out with a 55 percent “No” vote. At raucous ratification meetings at GM Oshawa and at Ford Oakville, workers jeered and booed union president Jerry Dias and denounced the pattern deal from the microphones. At GM CAMI, which sees their contract coming up for renewal next year, local officials distanced themselves from the current pattern, fearing to be tarred with the same brush in the eyes of their own unhappy membership.

To override opposition, Unifor officials repeated the auto bosses’ threats and blackmail. They parroted company claims that no better deal was possible,

employed corporate “whip-saw” tactics to divide one plant against another, and threatened workers with the loss of investment and jobs if they defied the company and the union and went out on strike.

Lest observers of the union treachery at Integram simply put this weekend’s events down to the utter venality and personal arrogance of Chiodo and Boughner—and no doubt Unifor President Jerry Dias behind the scenes—Local 444’s pro-company stance is in fact part of the entire union’s cynical “re-vote until you get it right” playbook. A virtually identical strategy was employed by the union in 2012 to scuttle a strike by 190 workers at Windsor’s Dakkota Integrated Systems’ parts manufacturing plant. Union officials forced a re-vote on a contract that had been rejected by 62 percent of the facility’s unionized employees only one day before. (see: “A Lesson for Autoworkers: The short-lived Windsor, Ontario Dakkota strike”)

Auto assembly and parts workers seeking to fight back against the never-ending series of concessions and the broader ruling class assault on public services and democratic and worker rights must draw the necessary political conclusions. To mount a successful counteroffensive, workers must break organizationally and politically from the nationalist, pro-company Unifor apparatus. The trans-national auto companies operate through an international strategy to pit workers from one country against those in another to foment a race to the bottom for all workers and guarantee massive profits for their management and shareholders. Autoworkers need an international and a socialist strategy to oppose these attacks and must join forces with their class sisters and brothers in the United States, Mexico, China and around the world, and develop new organs of working-class industrial and political struggle.



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