

Canadian auto union moves to ram through concessions deal on GM CAMI workers

Carl Bronski
15 September 2017

The contract covering 2,500 autoworkers at General Motors' CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario expires at 10:59 pm on Sunday, September 17. Rank-and-file workers are determined to recoup past concessions and win improved wages and benefits from the highly profitable automaker.

The Unifor union, however, has kept workers in the dark about the content of its negotiations with GM Canada. With utter contempt for the democratic rights of workers, Unifor has called a "contract ratification/strike information" meeting at the London convention centre for Sunday without releasing any information about what workers are supposed to discuss, let alone vote on.

Instead workers are told there are two possible scenarios: there is no agreement and a strike begins; or a tentative agreement is reached and workers immediately vote on it. If they ratify, they go to work; if not, they are on strike. In other words, Unifor officials are preparing to ram through a "last minute" agreement on Sunday without workers having any chance to study the full content of the proposed agreement.

How many times have autoworkers been handed a bogus "highlights" brochure and forced to quickly ratify a contract only to learn later about the miserable side deals and "letters of agreement" the union executives have signed behind their backs?

This cannot stand. Before voting, rank-and-file CAMI workers must be given the full contract and two full weeks to study it before any vote. If the union does not comply, workers should immediately vote down any agreement on principle.

On Tuesday, Unifor issued a "bargaining update #4" on its web site. Union officials claimed "some progress" had been made on in-plant issues although the company was using "stall tactics." Local 88 officials then acknowledged that discussions have not even begun on "economic issues," including "wages, pension, benefits,

lump sums, investment, etc."

The reality is that GM has no intention of letting up its savage cost-cutting campaign. The company, which announced \$2.4 billion in second-quarter profits and is sitting on a cash hoard of billions more, is licking its chops over the potential windfall it can grab in the aftermath of hurricane destruction in Texas and Florida. In order to continue funneling billions to its wealthy investors and top executives, however, GM is relying on Unifor and UAW to keep labour costs as low as possible.

With the full blessing of Unifor, CAMI workers have laboured six days a week for years under constant speed-up and a toothless grievance process. They have seen 425 of their brothers and sisters placed on permanent layoff, witnessed the increased use of "third tier" temporary part-time workers and suffered a decades-long wage freeze. And all this under conditions where GM has averaged a whopping \$2 billion per year in annual profits at the CAMI plant.

Last February, immediately after GM's announcement of hundreds of layoffs, Unifor plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel commented on the upcoming contract negotiations in the union's newsletter, saying, "Let me be clear, we are not going to put ourselves on a pedestal and price ourselves out of jobs and people need to look at the big picture". Van Boekel's warning to not expect too much was verified when Unifor officials put forth the pattern concessions rammed through at Ford, Fiat Chrysler and GM last year as the best possible scenario.

As autoworkers know full well, the negotiations at CAMI have always been used by GM and the union to set new low benchmark concessionary proposals that can be imposed on autoworkers at all the Detroit Three plants in Canada. The final destruction of any semblance of a defined benefits pension program for new hires first tested out in the 2013 CAMI contract was then included in the 2016 contracts at Ford, Fiat-Chrysler and the other GM

plants.

At Unifor's June meeting union officials talked about "thinking outside the box" regarding profit-sharing. If it were up to the auto bosses and their Unifor "partners," hourly wage increases would be eliminated altogether and replaced with the bogus profit-sharing scheme—the modern day version of piecework, which holds the livelihoods of workers hostage to the vagaries of the capitalist market and the short-sighted decisions of top executives.

There is growing opposition to the endless concessions handed over by the unions. In 2015, Fiat Chrysler workers rebelled against the UAW, voting down the sellout agreement by a 2-to-1 margin. The deal was only rammed through a second time at FCA, and then subsequently at GM and Ford, through a campaign of threats, lies and ballot-stuffing by the UAW, which is now implicated in a multi-million-dollar bribery scheme.

Unifor's proposals met with historic resistance from workers in the 2016 round of negotiations. GM workers at St. Catharines barely passed the deal, Ford workers at the giant Oakville complex roundly voted against the contract whilst Fiat-Chrysler and GM Oshawa workers logged record high "no" votes. To induce ratification, those "framework agreements" dangled phony investment undertakings that have yet to be enacted.

After record corporate profits and a 10-year wage freeze, benefit cuts, speed-up, the decimation of pensions and the creation of a second- and even third-tier labour force, workers were offered a measly 4 percent wage increase over three years. This was a de facto wage cut when inflation is factored in. Cost-of-living allowances were again suspended while the scandalously low new hire pay grids were barely increased. The concessionary CAMI pension scheme was rolled out to all Detroit Three plants. A \$6,000 lump sum award to be paid over three years in installments and a \$6,000 signing bonus—both subject to tax and union dues deductions—were included to induce acceptance.

Over the past month, indictments and convictions have been handed down alleging that some \$4.5 million in bribes were dispersed by Fiat Chrysler Vice President Alphons Iacobelli and his underlings to UAW officials to "take company friendly positions" in a series of contract negotiations. After leaving Fiat Chrysler, Iacobelli became one of the central negotiators for GM Canada in the 2016 bargaining round with Unifor.

Asked by the *Detroit Free Press* about the scandal, Unifor President Jerry Dias said he had always viewed

Iacobelli as a professional labour executive. "I've probably known Al for 15 years...I never would have expected it. I'm in shock, to say the least." Dias' "shock" emulates the statements of UAW head Dennis Williams despite emerging evidence that former UAW President Bob King, Williams's predecessor and confidant, was aware of the bribery program as early as 2011.

Autoworkers can place no trust in Unifor. The union acts as a junior partner of the corporations to ensure the continuing fat profits of the shareholders as well as the perks and salaries of the union executives.

If a fight is to be conducted to recoup the wages, benefits and job protections handed over by Unifor, then workers must take the initiative themselves. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* urges CAMI workers to elect rank-and-file committees in the plant to draw up their own demands. These should include: opposition to all layoffs, the abolition of multi-tiered wages and benefits, and the restoration of company-paid pensions. Workers should also demand the transformation of all temporary and part-time workers into permanent employees, with full wages, benefits, and a double-digit wage increase for all that would offset the years of wage cuts.

The rank-and-file committees, which must be independent of Unifor and all the big business political parties, should establish lines of communication between CAMI workers and autoworkers in the US, Mexico and throughout world to mount a common struggle to defend the right to secure a good-paying job for all workers.

An industrial counter-offensive by workers must be combined with the development of a new political strategy to mobilize the working class in opposition to all the corporate-controlled parties—Liberals, Tories and the New Democratic Party. A new mass socialist party of the working class is needed to fight for the transformation of the auto industry into a publicly owned enterprise as part of the socialist reorganization of the economy to meet human need, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party will provide CAMI workers with all the assistance necessary to help for their struggle. We urge workers to subscribe to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and contact the SEP today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact