

CAMI autoworkers locked in fight against GM Canada over jobs and wages

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20 September 2017

Autoworkers at General Motors' CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, 150 km southwest of Toronto, Canada, are locked in a critical battle that raises fundamental strategic questions for autoworkers in Canada and throughout the world.

Nearly 2,800 workers walked out Sunday night after the expiration of the four-year labour agreement between GM Canada and the Unifor union. In discussions with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, striking workers picketing the plant Tuesday expressed their determination to win substantial wage and benefit improvements, end long hours and oppressive working conditions and secure their jobs against further layoff threats.

An estimated 2,400 of the plant's workers have less than 14 years seniority and a large portion are trapped in the so-called "in-progression" pay scheme, first accepted by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), the predecessor of Unifor, in 2007. Under the multi-tier wage and benefit system workers are forced to work for ten years before earning the top rate of \$34.00 (US \$27.67). There are currently hundreds of workers earning \$23.91 (US \$19.46) as tier-two workers and as low as \$20.50 (US \$16.68) as Temporary Part Time employees or TPTs.

A young second-tier worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "We don't need a bad deal. We need financial security, not just job security. It takes 10 years to get top dollar and every time there is a new contract they could make it even longer. We're working for peanuts and there is a \$14 difference between the highest and the lowest paid workers.

"\$20 is not a good wage here in Ontario. If we didn't work all this overtime we would have no money left at the end of the month. I want a good raise; this can't

continue. Unifor is keeping hush-hush about the talks. We don't even know what they are asking for. I don't want to stand out here on the picket line, if all we are going to get is the same as Oshawa got last year," the young worker said, referring to the concessions Unifor gave up to GM last year, including ending fully employer-paid pensions for new hires, in exchange for worthless job promises. "If they come back with a bum deal I'm going to write my resume and move on."

While workers are pressing the fight for both jobs and good wages and benefits, Unifor officials have insisted that the sole issue in the CAMI strike is securing a commitment from GM to make CAMI the "lead" plant for the production of GM's hot-selling and highly profitable Equinox sports utility vehicle.

Running three shifts, six days a week, workers at the Ingersoll plant have produced 132,000 units so far this year, while workers at GM's Mexican plants in Ramos Arizpe and San Luis Potosi have produced 40,000. While no new talks are presently scheduled, industry analysts say Unifor has made back-channel approaches to GM seeking to convince the automaker to reduce Mexican production of the Equinox.

At the same time, Unifor officials have sought to tie the strike to their efforts to get the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and US President Donald Trump to renegotiate the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Unifor President Jerry Dias said CAMI is a "poster child" for what is wrong with NAFTA, with GM shifting production from one of the most productive plants in the world to Mexico in order to pay workers \$2 an hour.

Unifor rejects out of hand any appeal to Mexican and US workers for a joint struggle in defense of jobs and living standards. Like the United Auto Workers in the US, Unifor is embracing the filthy anti-Mexican

chauvinism of the Trump administration while promising to impose even more concessions on Canadian workers in the name of “defending Canadian jobs.”

World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter reporters discussed the statement “For an international strategy to win the CAMI strike” with strikers, who expressed a strong, yet still politically inchoate, desire to unify their struggle with workers in the US and in Mexico.

“When I started here, under the joint venture of GM and Suzuki, you couldn’t read a newspaper unless it was put out by the company,” a worker with 28 years at the plant said. “All these corporations are the same; they want to drive down our wages and pensions. They use the workers in Mexico and other countries for cheap labour. It would be awesome to unite workers all over the world. The companies plan out their operations on a world scale but we don’t. There shouldn’t even be any borders to keep workers separated.

“Working six days a week destroys your home and family life. We’re completely tied to the company and you don’t have a life. The older workers have had our wages frozen for a decade and the young workers have an uphill battle just to survive.”

Another worker with 28 years at the plant said, “We’re fighting for the next generation, for the guys that are making \$20 an hour. They have the right to make a good wage. The company has been pecking away at our wages and benefits for decades. Now they are making billions and we have stand up.”

Another veteran worker said, “This plant sets the pace for the other Big Three plants. We give up something big here like the defined pensions and then it’s spun out later to everybody else. I really get what you are saying about unifying autoworkers everywhere. The companies are all global and they play us off one against the other because we’re not united globally.”

Another long-term employee remarked on the bribery scandal in the United States where top UAW union officials in charge of negotiations at Fiat-Chrysler received millions of dollars in bribes from FCA management to impose concessions contracts. “I’ve read some stuff on that. It really makes you stop and think. Exactly whose side is everyone on? There’s been nothing but bad deals here lately. It makes you think there’s probably a lot more to negotiations we don’t

know about.”

“We were surprised Unifor even called a strike,” another second-tier worker told the newsletter. “This must be the worst contract in history and the union knew it couldn’t sell it to the members. I think they plan to keep us out a week and then try to push through more concessions, like eliminating defined benefit pensions for senior workers. The union will tell us ‘you’re lucky to have a job’ and say they fought as hard as they could, but the company wouldn’t budge.

“Where do you draw the line when the company is making billions? GM has \$22 billion in the bank. There are all these anti-bullying signs around the plant, but GM is the biggest bully there is.

“I knew back in my college days we lived in a global economy. There is no such thing as Canadian autoworkers, US autoworkers and Mexican autoworkers—only autoworkers. We all have the same interests and should be on the same page. The ‘Buy Canadian’ or ‘Buy American’ stuff only creates competition among labourers.

“It’s like the peaches in *Grapes of Wrath*. The Okies were supposed to get 5 cents for every bushel of peaches they picked. But 1,000 showed up for 500 jobs and instead of 5 cents, they got 2 ½ cents. It’s crazy that the problems Steinbeck was writing about in 1939 are still here today.

“If I were able to speak to the Mexican workers I would say we are not enemies. I’d tell them to not work for nothing. The Mexican workers have to demand better working conditions, better wages and conditions.”

Commenting on the deplorable conditions at the CAMI plant, which Unifor has sanctioned, she said, “I’ve seen more workers rubbing shoulders and arms because of pain than I ever did before. There are workers in their twenties who are on restrictive duties because of pain and injuries. The plan is to have a disposable workforce. They use and abuse workers until they can’t do the work anymore and then they let them go.”



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