

GM Canada strike in danger

Why is Unifor trying to gag CAMI strikers?

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The strike by nearly 2,800 autoworkers at GM Canada's CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, just outside of London, is at a critical turning point. While rank-and-file workers remain determined to defend their jobs and fight for improved wages, benefits and working conditions, officials from the Unifor union said Wednesday that they have offered an "olive branch" to GM to end the strike.

In discussions with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, CAMI workers have made it clear that they want to reverse years of concessions handed over by Unifor, and its predecessor organization, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), including multi-tier wages and the end of defined benefit pensions that punish younger workers, a decade-long pay freeze for older workers and mandatory six-day workweeks that disrupt their family lives.

Unifor officials, however, have limited their demands to seeking a meaningless promise from GM to make the CAMI plant the lead factory for the production of the company's hot-selling Equinox SUVs, and reducing production at two Mexican plants that produce a smaller number of the model.

In an interview with the *London Free Press*, Unifor Local 88 Plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel, standing in front of a huge Canadian flag with the words "Canadian Made", mentioned the unspecified "olive branch" proposal even after acknowledging that GM has refused to even answer the union's pleas to resume talks. Van Boekel said the proposal was "fair" and "could get us moving really quickly." In other words, Unifor is preparing another miserable sellout by offering more concessions in exchange for some bogus promise from GM.

Over the last several days, reporters for the WSW *Autoworker Newsletter* have visited the picket lines to

discuss the political issues in this struggle and circulate the newsletter's statement, "For an international strategy to win the CAMI strike."

The statement urges CAMI workers to build rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of Unifor and to block every effort by the pro-company union to shut down the strike and impose management's demands. These committees, the statement says, should formulate their own demands—including the rehiring of all laid-off workers, the elimination of the hated multi-tier wage and benefit system and forced overtime, and an immediate 30 percent wage increase as redress for ten years of wage freezes and the suspension of COLA increases. To fight for this, the *Newsletter* says, workers should broaden the struggle throughout the Canadian, US and Mexican auto industry.

These proposals were met with great interest by CAMI workers, including many who expressed their concern over being kept in the dark by Unifor and the union's disdain for their economic concerns. "I want financial security and job security," said one second-tier worker, "I'm not standing on this picket line to accept a bum deal like the one at Oshawa last year."

Autoworkers also expressed an innate sense that the only way to fight a massive transnational corporation would be to unite with Mexican workers and autoworkers in the United States. "There are no Mexican autoworkers, Canadian autoworkers or US autoworkers, there are just autoworkers and we should all be on the same page," declared another worker.

As these discussions deepened, nervous picket captains and other officials of the Local 88 Unifor union bureaucracy invariably moved in to advise workers to cease discussion. They called ahead to other picketed factory gates with instructions to refuse to

even take the *Autoworker Newsletter* and took photographs of those strikers continuing to speak with the reporters. At several plant gates, workers quietly approached our reporters to acknowledge that they had plenty to say but were being stymied by the policing of the picket lines by their own union officials.

After such discussions, the picket captains came up to the WSWs reporters to inform them that they had to leave and that they should call local union spokesperson Brent Tree for any further statements. One picket captain said this was because the union didn't want "mixed messages" from workers, while another said he did not want to have a "war" on his hands.

The WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* called Mr. Tree to ask him if it was Unifor's policy to ban workers from freely speaking to the press, and in particular the WSWs. As soon as the reporter identified himself, Tree hung up the phone.

It is now clear why Unifor is trying to gag its members.

On the picket lines, workers discussed and were formulating demands to meet their needs. The problem for Unifor, however, is that these demands—for improved living standards and working conditions—cut across its corporatist "partnership" with GM, which is based on collaborating in the lowering of workers' living standards. That is why Unifor has sought to stifle discussion and move as quickly as possible to shut the strike down.

Far from articulating and fighting for the demands of rank-and-file workers, Unifor long ago renounced the class struggle and integrated itself into the structure of corporate management, while becoming a pillar of Trudeau and the Ontario Liberal government. Far from lessening the exploitation of workers, Unifor serves them up as cheap labour and suppresses every form of resistance to the capitalist exploiters.

CAMI workers have witnessed firsthand the fraudulent nature of Unifor's perennial boast that it is a beacon of rank-and-file democracy. What kind of organization negotiates behind the backs of workers and then demands that they vote on a contract they never see in full or are given enough time even to discuss with their coworkers? What kind of organization suppresses its members' right to public discourse and instructs them not to read material that

seeks to broaden their strike and link it with autoworkers all across the globe?

The *Autoworker Newsletter* and its call for the setting up of rank-and-file committees in opposition to the corporate-controlled Unifor won widespread support among the 23,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers during last year's contract struggle in Canada where there was record opposition to the sellout deals. In 2015, the newsletter was the center of opposition against the sellout agreement imposed by the UAW on 140,000 Detroit Three autoworkers in the United States.

Like Unifor, UAW officials denounced the *Autoworker Newsletter*, saying it was spreading false information, breaking up the "unity" of workers and functioning as an "outside agitator." It turned out that the UAW officials screaming the loudest against the WSWs were part of or had concealed the fact that Fiat Chrysler had paid \$4.5 million in bribes to top UAW negotiators to sell out their members.

Unifor is no more a genuine workers organization than the UAW. That is why GM boasts about its union "partners" who share in the profits sweated out of the backs of workers who Unifor President Jerry Dias, Van Boekel & Co. falsely claim to represent.

Everything now depends on the independent initiative of rank-and-file workers. This stab in the back must be stopped. Workers should elect committees, led by the most militant and self-sacrificing workers, to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class throughout North America to defend against GM's assault.



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