

Canadian union seeks to shut down CAMI strike by offering concessions to GM

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As the strike by close to 2,800 GM workers at its CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario approaches the end of its first week, the Unifor trade union is working behind the scenes to shut it down. Despite the militant determination of autoworkers to fight back against decades of concessions, the struggle is under imminent threat from the union bureaucracy.

The *London Free Press* reported late Thursday that Unifor had made an offer earlier in the day aimed at restarting talks with GM. In keeping with its refusal to tell workers anything about the content of negotiations, Unifor Local 88 chairman Mike Van Boekel merely noted that the union had offered GM concessions on “monetary issues.”

Strikers should be on their guard. Unifor has time and again imposed givebacks on “monetary issues,” i.e. slashing wages, attacking workers’ pensions, and giving up cost-of-living allowance (COLA) benefits. Van Boekel’s comments make clear that the union is preparing another sell-out so as to shut down the strike as quickly as possible. As Van Boekel, who earlier stated that a tentative agreement between GM and Unifor would be enough to call a halt to the labour stoppage, told the *Free Press*, “We think this is a proposal that can get us moving really quickly.”

Striking workers have made clear in discussions with the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that they would support the mobilization of autoworkers across Canada, the United States and Mexico against the auto giants to win substantial wage increases, an end to multi-tier wages and benefits, and job security.

But Unifor is instead peddling the poison of Canadian nationalism, focusing on calls for GM to commit to “Canadian made” products and emblazoning the picket lines with huge Maple Leaf flags.

In a political stunt, Unifor bussed over one hundred

CAMI workers to Ottawa Friday to participate in an explicitly nationalist rally on the eve of the opening of the next round of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) talks. In remarks that Donald Trump could have made, Van Boekel proclaimed, “We are the poster child for NAFTA. This is exactly what we’re fighting about. We have to keep manufacturing in this country.”

The efforts of Van Boekel and his fellow union bureaucrats to present such calls as being concerned with defending jobs are a fraud. For over three decades, Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), have trotted out the line of “keeping manufacturing in this country” to justify imposing one round of concessions after another, including thousands of layoffs, the introduction of two-and three-tier wage regimes in the auto plants, the elimination of defined-benefit pension rights, and the slashing of workplace benefits.

In truth, the principal concern of Unifor president Jerry Dias, Van Boekel and their colleagues is to exploit the CAMI strike to deepen their partnership with Justin Trudeau’s Liberals. Dias was in Washington for the opening round of NAFTA talks so he could function as a de facto adviser to the Canadian government’s delegation. In a disgusting nationalist tirade at a rally of Bombardier workers on Wednesday, he urged “our federal government”—the same right-wing big-business government that has hiked military spending by 70 percent and begun the implementation of a vast privatization program of public infrastructure—to “fight the United States” and “defend our jobs.”

To defend its cozy alliance with Trudeau’s Liberals, Unifor is seeking to whip up animosity towards Mexican autoworkers. Unifor’s appeal for GM to make

CAMI the “lead plant” in manufacturing the Equinox is based on the bogus claim that Canadian workers can secure their jobs by calling on GM managers to lay off their colleagues in Mexico.

In contrast to Unifor’s nationalism, the reality is that CAMI workers, like fellow autoworkers in the United States, Mexico and the world over, confront a daily struggle against a major global corporation, which is working hand-in-glove with the union bureaucracy to exploit them ever more ruthlessly.

A CAMI worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* about how the union has collaborated with management to impose bone-crunching 60-hour workweeks spread across six days. “Throughout the launch of the 2018 Equinox our labour force under the guidance of Mike Van Boekel and Committee created a miserable and hazardous work place,” the worker said. “The launch began with inadequate training in a failed pilot-project introducing us to new components and processes. Incomplete processes, hazardous machinery and cluttered poorly laid-out workstations followed. Hourly job rotation required workers to perform 18-plus jobs per team throughout the day and made it impossible to make improvements to work stations or jobs on account of the 30-plus people rotating through the jobs per day.”

Injuries have risen rapidly as a result. “Look around the plant on any given day and you will see workers showing up for duty with bad backs, shoulders and hands. And it’s not just at work. People’s personal lives are wrecked because of all the nagging injuries and downright exhaustion from these never-ending, six-day a week mandatory shifts and unsafe work practices that the union does nothing about,” the worker added.

The union stood by as workers were laid off on the same day as temporary part-time (TPT) employees were hired on at lower wages and worse conditions. “When union chairperson Van Boekel was questioned about the excessive hours and informed they exceeded Employment Standards he responded by saying we have workers getting laid off and to let the poor bastards work overtime,” the worker continued. “He opposed the complaint and encouraged workers to ignore the law. He’s the most anti-labour employee in our plant.”

Unifor has suppressed numerous worker complaints, the worker added, telling workers who raised concerns

to go to the company’s HR department. Commenting on the prospects for a new contract, the worker remarked, “Nobody believes the union will do anything. From what little they’ve said, the proposal sounds terrible. The best we can hope for is the rotten (Unifor-Detroit Three) pattern.”

This is why workers must immediately move to elect an action committee controlled by the rank-and-file and led by the most militant workers to seize control of the strike from the hands of Unifor. CAMI workers face powerful enemies, but they have stronger allies. The issues they are fighting for are the same as those confronting autoworkers at plants in the United States, Mexico and internationally. The action committee must therefore issue an immediate appeal to GM and other Detroit Three workers across North America to join their struggle by launching their own strikes and refusing to perform additional work demanded by GM to compensate for the strike. Autoworkers at other plants must be urged to join a broader counteroffensive against the decades of concessions and attacks imposed by management with the intimate collaboration of their Unifor and UAW lackeys.

This is, above all, a political fight. It requires the adoption of a socialist and internationalist program capable of guiding the struggles of autoworkers and the working class as a whole in the fight to put an end to the system of capitalist exploitation and replace it with a workers’ government committed to placing the needs of workers above the corporate drive to boost profits.



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