

# CAMI autoworkers strike against GM Canada at the crossroads

Carl Bronski  
26 September 2017

With the strike by 2,800 Canadian autoworkers at GM's CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario entering its ninth day, the struggle by workers to win substantial wage and benefit improvements and to defend their jobs has reached a critical turning point. While workers have remained determined, over the weekend, the national leadership of Unifor and its Local 88 representatives met with GM officials and tabled an undisclosed "olive branch" proposal to the company to end the strike.

Any such proposal, worked out behind the backs of workers without the slightest discussions, let alone consideration of their demands, will be nothing but a sellout, along the lines of the concessions contracts negotiated by Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers union, for decades.

The only demand Unifor has made is for GM to give the union a letter promising to make the Ingersoll plant the "lead" facility for the future production of the Equinox, meaning in the event of production cutbacks due to a slowing economy Mexican workers producing the same model at GM plants in Ramos Arizpe and San Luis Potosi would be the first to lose their jobs.

While claiming to address the "economic and contract" concerns of rank-and-file workers, the union has not revealed any details of its proposal. Local 88 officials, including Plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel, have made it clear they will not make wage and benefits demands that would make the factory uncompetitive, and have sought to dampen expectations essentially telling workers they should be happy they have jobs.

Workers at CAMI have seen Unifor negotiate a whole series of concessions contracts that have included a 10-year wage freeze, speed-up, mandatory overtime, pension and benefits cuts, suspension of cost-of-living

increases and the institutionalization of a two-tier wages and benefits system. A significant and growing percentage of the workforce now fall into the second tier. Indeed, as management has steadily increased the number of temporary part-time employees in the plant, a veritable three-tier system is now in operation.

Of course, investments and so-called production "guarantees" are not worth the paper they are printed on as autoworkers sorely found out at the now defunct Ford St. Thomas facility and at the GM Oshawa Truck Plant. In Oshawa, Unifor officials told workers to ratify a new collective agreement because they had negotiated "language" to save the plant from closure.

But within a month, GM, citing a "market conditions" letter in the agreement that was not shared by the union with workers, announced the closure of the plant. In St. Thomas, the completion of a \$150 million paint shop refurbishment in 2002 did not stop Ford from announcing several years later the shuttering of that plant.

Unifor officials have sought to subordinate the strike to their maneuvers with the Trudeau government and the Trump administration to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Last Friday, Unifor officials dragged about 100 CAMI workers to an Ottawa rally where they urged workers to place their confidence in the Canadian and US governments to defend their jobs.

Over the weekend, GM Canada President Steve Carlisle explained to Bloomberg News the rapacious mindset of the giant transnational. "Asia has a whole range from high-cost regions to low-cost regions and Europe has a range of high-cost regions to low-cost regions, and that helps make them competitive from a global perspective. We have that same situation in NAFTA, so if we intervene in that in the wrong way,

we'll deteriorate our competitiveness”.

Whilst transnational corporations relentlessly pursue a global strategy that seeks to pit one national group of workers against another in order to whipsaw jobs, wages and working conditions in a never-ending “race to the bottom”, Unifor, like the United Auto Workers south of the border, promotes economic nationalism, which drives a wedge between Canadian, US and Mexican workers and lines them up behind the trade wars and military conflicts of their “own” capitalist governments. Jerry Dias & Co. are hailing the ultra-right billionaire Trump in so far as his trade war policies are aimed against Mexico, while at the same time denouncing Trump over the Bombardier-Boeing conflict.

Unifor has developed an intimate alliance with Justin Trudeau's big business Liberals, based on contract concessions, support for a low Canadian dollar that only serves to jack up consumer prices and reduce workers' real wages, and the continued imposition of social spending cuts and other measures to boost the insatiable profit drive of big business on the backs of the working class.

Expressing the frustration of the trade union bureaucracy, Local 88 President Dan Borthwick complained to Bloomberg, “Our members could go back to \$0 an hour and we still couldn't compete with Mexico.” If they could get away with it, Unifor would reduce workers to unpaid slaves, but their endless program of wage-cutting has run up against the stiff resistance of younger and older workers alike.

What the unions reject out of hand is any struggle to unify autoworkers throughout North America in a common fight to defend the right of all workers to good-paying and secure jobs and a comfortable retirement.

There is a growing sense among rank-and-file workers that the unions' program of economic nationalism and labour-management “partnership” has brought them to a dead end and that a new strategy is needed.

As one striking CAMI worker speaking to reporters from the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* aptly put it, “We always get caught up with all this free-trade stuff and before you know it, you start trying to guard your own job and then you get scared and you don't even think about how that fits into the whole picture like someone else down the road maybe is getting screwed

because you end up with this or that product and they don't. And maybe next year somebody in Mexico or the States gets your product and you feel screwed but they probably feel like they deserved it. And it's just a bad way of thinking. And while we're doing that, the company is laughing all the way to the bank.”

There is widespread support for a common struggle, as a worker at Fiat Chrysler in Indiana told the *WSWS*, “It's important we all support our Canadian brothers. They're trying to accomplish what we at FCA did not.”

If CAMI workers are to prevail, however, the rank and file must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of Unifor. Rank-and-file committees, led by the most militant and self-sacrificing workers, should be elected to formulate demands—including the abolition of the two-tier pay system, an immediate 30 percent raise and the restoration of COLA and fully employer-paid pensions, and the rehiring of all laid-off workers.

In opposition to the claims by the auto bosses and Unifor executives who insist that such claims are unaffordable—even as GM showers billions on its top investors and executives—CAMI workers should fight for the full mobilisation of the working class in Canada and appeal directly to workers in the US and Mexico to oppose any further layoffs or plant closing threats. This must be combined with a new political strategy to break with the Liberals, Tories and NDP, and build a mass socialist party of the working class to reorganise the economy to meet human need, not profit. This includes transforming the giant auto monopolies into publicly owned enterprises, democratically controlled by working people.



To contact the *WSWS* and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**