

Unifor leaders plot with GM to beat back resistance of CAMI strikers

Jerry White**29 September 2017**

The top leadership of the Canadian auto union, Unifor, traveled to Detroit Thursday for high level talks with General Motors executives aimed at ending the strike by nearly 2,800 autoworkers at the CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario. The workers who produce GM's top-selling and highly profitable Equinox SUV have been on strike since September 17.

Rank-and-file workers are determined to defend their jobs and fight for substantial improvements in their wages and working conditions after years of concessions handed over by Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), in the name of "saving" jobs. The factory, which operates under a separate labour agreement, has been used to set a benchmark for driving down production costs throughout Canada.

Unifor officials have sought to dampen workers' expectations and have limited their demands to attaining a paper promise that GM will make the Ingersoll facility its "lead" plant for production of the Equinox. In the event of a downturn in sales, Unifor wants GM to first lay off workers at two Mexican plants that make the same model.

The pilgrimage to Detroit by Unifor President Jerry Dias and other top officials occurred after Local 88 President Dan Borthwick—who had claimed Tuesday that "some progress had been made" this week in talks that had resumed last weekend—suddenly reversed himself saying Thursday that nothing had come out of a "series of disappointing meetings" with GM this week.

Unifor officials, with the help of the corporate-controlled media, are engaged in nothing but public theatre. The talks between Dias & Co. and GM are not between antagonistic parties, but between labour-management "partners" who both agree that even more money must be sweated off the backs of CAMI

workers. Unifor's concern about the auto companies maintaining a "Canadian footprint" boils down to one thing: preserving the dues base of the organization and its corporatist relations with the auto bosses, no matter how little its members are paid.

Dias is no doubt begging GM to give the union some type of face-saving gesture to disorient workers and break their resistance to even more cost-cutting concessions. Thus far, however, GM officials have refused to make any, even meaningless, commitments for future production at the plant.

In an interview on the Craig Needles show on AM 980 radio Thursday morning, Local 88 Plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel acknowledged that GM has not budged on such commitments and that negotiators have not even talked about wages, benefits or working conditions. "They don't want to move...They say it's their plant and they'll decide where the product goes," said Van Boekel.

It was unfathomable to Van Boekel that the corporation would react this way after Unifor had spent the last three decades helping the company ramp up the exploitation of autoworkers and get record profits out of the plant. "We've been number one in every area. We've worked six days a week for the last nine years...There's no logical explanation."

Van Boekel acknowledged that "people are getting more frustrated" and expressed concern that workers were in no mood to accept further givebacks. "They are asking for concessions in so many areas...They made \$12 billion last year and they're going to make \$10-11 billion this year. We are not entertaining concessions," Van Boekel claimed.

Every worker knows, however, that GM has no intention of granting anything for free, even a worthless promise. In fact Unifor officials have not issued any

demands, regarding wages, benefits and working conditions, and Van Boekel is on record saying that union would not “price ourselves out of jobs.”

Asked if the union was asking for more money, he said the negotiators had not even talked about money yet, “we’re still in local language, on work rules,” adding, “We’re not taking concessions, it is already run like a prison, we’re not going back in time.” Asked to explain the remark about prison-like conditions, Boekel said, “I think they have better absentee rules in Kingston Penitentiary that they do at CAMI Automotive. Our members know what it is like in there. We have a 99 point something attendance rate. We should be treated way better than that.”

Van Boekel’s bluster about not accepting further concessions aside, his acknowledgment that CAMI workers face conditions comparable to prison labour is a damning indictment of Unifor. If CAMI is run like a prison, then the Unifor officials are the prison guards. The question is: Why should workers pay any allegiance, let alone their hard-earned money, to such an organization?

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* alone has fought for rank-and-file workers to take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of Unifor and fight to broaden the struggle throughout the auto and auto parts industry in Canada, the US and Mexico. We have exposed the reactionary efforts by Unifor to line Canadian workers up behind the trade war measures of Justin Trudeau and the Liberals and the fascistic billionaire President Donald Trump.

Unifor officials have responded to the growing interest and support for the political perspective and program advanced by the *Autoworker Newsletter* by launching a campaign against the WSWS, which has included instructing its picket captains to order WSWS supporters off the picket lines, and to remove any favourable Facebook comments from workers.

“The *Autoworker Newsletter* is getting under their skin,” said one veteran CAMI worker. “They are sending out Facebook messages telling workers to disregard the newsletter. I say, if you’re right, you’re right. I don’t like Unifor telling me what I’m allowed to read and what I’m not. It’s like what Google is doing, restricting what news you can have. They have a vested interest in keeping workers from reading the WSWS.”

“Other workers are circulating your articles, not just at CAMI, but at Oakville and Oshawa. You guys are bang on. Trudeau and Trump are with the corporations, not the workers. A worker is a worker, whether you are from Canada, the US or Mexico. The union helps the corporation take away our pensions and benefits in the name of competing with Mexico. What’s been the result? This whole area, from southern Ontario to Buffalo and western New York, has been deindustrialized.”

“[Unifor President] Jerry Dias is a businessman. The union is run like a business, just like GM, and the government of Canada and the United States.”

A second-tier worker and a single mother of two added, “They’re taking away our livelihoods. We’ve tried to get the union to fight, we even appealed to management to improve unsafe conditions, and appealed to the members of Parliament. In the end, the dollar wins...GM wins. They own the union, the government and every place that is supposed to protect the worker.

“This strike should be a spearhead to regain what we lost. But for Dias, Van Boekel and the other Unifor officials, they just want to sell us another rotten deal. Over the last 20 years, things have only gotten worse. There are so many homeless people in the London area. If a poor person steals a can of peaches they will throw you in jail or the cops will kill you. But the CEOs, who are real sociopaths, they can get away with any crime and there are no consequences.”

The WSWS also spoke to a former CAMI contract worker who expressed support for the strike and discussed conditions facing young workers in Ingersoll and the surrounding area.

If CAMI workers are to prevent another betrayal, they must prepare now to defeat Unifor’s plans to push through a sellout contract as early as this Sunday. The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* will provide all the assistance necessary to take forward this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact