

Unifor president at CAMI picket line: A declaration of bankruptcy

Jerry White, Carl Bronski
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Unifor President Jerry Dias and local union officials addressed hundreds of striking workers in front of the General Motors CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario Sunday morning as the strike by 2,800 workers at the factory ended its second week.

Predictably, union officials advanced no strategy to mobilize broader working-class support for the CAMI strikers. Instead Dias combined empty rhetoric with statements such as, “We will last one day longer than GM” and, “We will not be collateral damage in the quest for profits” with thinly disguised chauvinistic appeals to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the Liberals and US President Donald Trump to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and “fix the Mexican problem.”

The CAMI strike reveals the failure of the nationalist strategy of Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union, which split from the United Auto Workers in 1986 hoping it could cut separate deals with GM, Ford and Chrysler based on lower labour costs from the cheaper Canadian dollar and the government-funded health system. This “strategy” collapsed as the UAW repeatedly imposed deep wage cuts on US autoworkers, and the Detroit-based automakers expanded to Mexico for even cheaper labour.

While rank-and-file workers are determined to win substantial pay and benefit improvements, Unifor has limited its strike demands to obtaining a letter from GM promising to make the Ingersoll facility the “lead” plant for the production of the highly profitable Equinox crossover vehicle. In practice this would mean, in the event of falling demand in an economic downturn, GM would lay off the 7,200 workers who build the Equinox at its Mexican factories in San Luis Potosi and Ramos Arizpe before Canadian workers.

The strike has exposed the utter bankruptcy of the trade union bureaucracy, which has sought to entice GM and other automakers to retain their manufacturing operations in Canada by imposing wage and benefit concessions on workers. Contrary to the claims of the unions, none of these givebacks have saved a single job.

In a flurry of demagoguery, Dias complained that wages were so low in Mexico that workers could not afford the cars that they build. The Unifor president failed to say that second- and third-tier workers in Canada and the US could not afford the cars they build either because of decades of union-backed concessions.

Dias and Local 88 Plant Chairman Van Boekel expressed frustration that GM would shift production to Mexico after the union helped the company squeeze enormous volume and profits off the backs of CAMI workers who face a six-day work schedule under conditions that Van Boekel compared to a prison.

“We have worked way too long,” Van Boekel complained. “This is the one plant for quality according to the JD Power, and we have been ranked the leanest and most efficient plant in North America by Anchor. If it weren’t for us in the first place, they couldn’t build in Mexico.” He added, “We can compete with the US. We can compete with Europe. We can’t compete with Mexico.”

GM has rejected Unifor’s demand for future product commitments out of hand. Instead it has ramped up production at its Mexican plants to make up for lost production during the CAMI strike. According to an article last week in *Zocalo*, a Mexican press outlet, the Ramos Arizpe plant was scheduled to add Saturday work for its two shifts and carry out new measures to increase productivity.

Mike Van Boekel read out a reply from GM issued

after last Thursday's meeting in Detroit with Dias and Local 88 officials. "Should business conditions or needs change, the company will consider all factors including potential impacts on CAMI Assembly and its employees prior to deciding on how to address those changing conditions. The company maintains complete discretion on how to address business conditions and needs and where those needs will be built."

In other words, GM is saying the factories are capitalist private property and it will dispense with them any way its pleases in order to boost the returns of its Wall Street investors and top executives. Like every other transnational corporation, GM scours the globe to find the cheapest sources of labour and the highest profits.

Unifor cannot challenge this because, like the rest of the unions in Canada, the United States and internationally, they defend the capitalist profit system and consider private property of the capitalist owners inviolable. If workers' needs are to take priority over private property and profit, however, then workers have to advance a socialist program, including transforming the giant auto companies into publicly owned enterprises, controlled democratically by working people.

Dias called the CAMI strike a "poster child for everything that has failed in the North American Free Trade Agreement." He claimed that collaborating with the Liberals and the Trump administration on the basis of trade war would defend workers' jobs. This is a lie. The big business parties in Canada and the right-wing billionaire president in the US are seeking to line workers up behind new trade war measures, which will coincide with even greater demands for sacrifice and greater tax cuts and incentives to the corporations, and inevitably to lead workers into the slaughter of a world war.

Unifor officials announced that talks were resuming with GM Monday morning and, despite their phony tub-thumping, that they were hoping for a quick settlement. They also sought to assuage the anger of rank-and-file workers who have been kept in the dark about the behind-the-scenes negotiations and put on \$250-a-week strike rations.

CAMI workers must be on guard against an impending sellout deal. GM has no intention of giving anything, even a paper promise of future jobs, without

exactng even more concessions from workers with the help of its Unifor "partners."

Everything depends on the independent initiative of rank-and-file workers who should elect factory committees to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands and fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class throughout Canada, the US and Mexico.



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