

As CAMI strike ends third week, Unifor peddles Canadian nationalism at rally

Jerry White
7 October 2017

With the strike by 2,800 autoworkers at General Motors' CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario reaching the end of its third week, the Canadian auto union, Unifor, held what was billed as a solidarity rally at the plant on Friday.

No effort was made to mobilize workers on behalf of the embattled CAMI workers. While various union executives, including Canadian Labour Council (CLC) President Hassan Yussuff, Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) Council President Chris Buckley, and Unifor President Jerry Dias issued empty statements of support, virtually none of the OFL's nearly one million members were brought to the rally, nor could they be since it was held in the middle of a workday.

There were about 800 workers at the rally, with no more than 600 of the 2,800 striking CAMI workers, or less than one in four, participating. The low turnout was a vote of no confidence in Unifor, which has kept workers in the dark about its secret negotiations with GM and the concessions it has already offered the company.

This stonewalling continued at the rally. Unifor Plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel boasted that the national and local union executives had just completed the best two days of negotiating and "we got the contract probably 90-95 percent done." Van Boekel did not provide a single detail, however, of what the union and company agreed to.

Aware of growing dissatisfaction among workers, who have been reduced to a starvation strike benefit of \$250 per week, Unifor officials once again did everything they could to prevent the circulation of the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, which has fought to mobilize the working class throughout Canada, the US and Mexico. Unifor officials attempted to use physical intimidation against newsletter

supporters, but several workers at the rally intervened to defend their right to speak to workers.

In his remarks, Unifor President Dias made it clear that Unifor is using CAMI workers as pawns in its backroom maneuvers with the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, along with the Trump administration, over the ongoing renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Identifying himself entirely with the corporate and geo-political interests of Canadian capitalism, Dias declared, "We might be a small nation but we are not stupid." He boasted that he would be in Washington, DC next week and made the absurd claim that the Trudeau and Trump administrations—the political representatives of big business—would negotiate a "progressive trade deal that would benefit the workers not the corporations."

In fact, the continued oppression of workers of Mexico is key to the strategy of US and Canadian capitalism, which the unions defend. Ray Tanguay, the former head of Toyota Canada and an advisor to the Trudeau government, told an industry conference in London, Ontario Thursday that the exploitation of low wage workers in Mexico was critical for North American manufacturers to compete with Europe and Asia, which also rely on plants in countries with cheap labor. "If North America can't compete, our vehicles will come from somewhere else in the world," Tanguay said.

Unifor is looking for stronger protectionist measures to retain its base of dues income, no matter how ruthless the exploitation of the workers it claims to represent. Lining workers up behind Trudeau, let alone the far-right billionaire US president, will only entangle workers in increasingly bitter trade tensions—including between Canada and the United States itself. Far from

advancing the interests of workers, this will only lead to greater sacrifice and the danger of workers being dragooned into a future war over the division of markets, profits and access to cheap labor.

Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, have spent decades imposing concessions to entice GM and other corporations, while blocking any genuine struggle by workers to stop the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs. Trying to conceal the rotten record of his organization, Dias noted the previous deals the union signed with GM, which supposedly included job protections but ended up with the closure of the Oshawa Truck plant in 2008 and the transfer of Camaro production from the Oshawa facility to a plant in Lansing, Michigan, in 2015, cutting 1,000 jobs in Oshawa.

Dias chalked this up to the gullibility of union negotiators, who failed to understand the company's ruthlessness. He did not tell workers in the audience that the union had agreed to an escape clause that gave GM a green light to slash jobs if "market conditions" required it.

CAMI workers have made it clear they want to recoup years of pay and benefit concessions handed over by Unifor to GM, which made billions in profits for its top shareholders and executives. Every union speaker, however, emphasized the strike was "not over money." It is, of course, about money for GM and its Wall Street and Bay Street investors.

Several union executives, including OFL President Chris Buckley, complained that GM was resisting any pledge of future production at the plant even though Unifor had enforced six-day a week production for the last eight years, met all sorts of targets for pumping production out of workers, and upheld a management dictatorship in the plant, which union officials admitted was like a prison.

Repeating what he no doubt told GM negotiators, Van Boekel announced that 1,000 CAMI workers were due to retire over the next three to four years, echoing comments made last year by Dias who told GM it would "save billions" by replacing retiring workers with new hires on second- and third-tier wages and inferior pensions due to Unifor concessions.

Unifor officials have made only one public demand: in the event of an economic downturn, GM should lay off workers at its Mexican plants that make the

Equinox crossover vehicle before any Canadian workers at CAMI.

Throughout the rally, which was characterized by Maple Leaf flags and anti-Mexican rhetoric, Unifor officials presented workers at GM's San Luis Potosi and Ramos Arizpe factories in Mexico as competitors and enemies of CAMI workers, not their co-workers fighting the same global corporation.

Among rank-and-file workers there was a real sentiment for a struggle and concern over the direction of the strike. Responding to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter's* call for the international unity of US, Mexican and Canadian workers, **Phil**, a second tier CAMI worker, said, "I think we all have to stand together, it's not just about Canada." He added, "I want to know my job is going to be here to keep me going. If this plant closes people from around the whole area will be affected."

Line, a veteran CAMI worker said, "We walked the picket line in 1992 to try to win a pattern agreement with all the other Canadian autoworkers at the Detroit-based corporations. GM has gotten greedier since then. My job is important, but so is the job of a Mexican worker. I would like us all to get together to raise their wages and to defend our jobs."

Violette, a worker at a factory that supplies parts to the CAMI plant, added, "This strike is opening the eyes of workers everywhere, not just union but non-union too. They try to turn workers against each other. A temp is working for \$17 an hour side-by-side with a worker making nearly twice that much. The second-tier wage system should never have happened."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact