

Lessons of the CAMI autoworkers' strike in Canada

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The close to 2,800 General Motors workers who struck the company's CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, for a month have suffered a major defeat. GM, with the connivance of the Unifor trade union, employed threats to ram through yet another rotten contract which met none of the strikers' demands, including job security.

When the struggle was in its fourth week, GM management displayed its utter contempt for autoworkers and their families by threatening to shut down the plant and ramp up production in Mexico unless the strike was halted. Less than a day later, Unifor capitulated without a fight and wound up the strike by imposing virtually the same concessions-laden contract offered to the workers at the Detroit Three operations across Canada in 2016, which was adopted in the face of historic levels of opposition from autoworkers in the plants. Unifor head Jerry Dias, who had blustered only 24 hours before the end of the strike that Unifor would not take GM's threats "sitting down," instead ensured that the union rolled over.

The strike did not fail to achieve its goals due to a lack of readiness among GM workers to fight. On the contrary, workers made clear with their overwhelming strike vote, sacrifices during a month on the miserly union strike pay of \$250 per week, and comments on the picket line that they were ready to wage a counter-offensive to overturn the years of wage freezes, the hated two-tier wage system, and other concessions imposed by Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW).

However, this struggle was sabotaged by Unifor. Although GM made profits of \$9.43 billion (CAN \$11.82 billion) last year, including record North American earnings for its Wall Street and Bay Street investors, Unifor officials assured the company that the strike was "not about money." Unifor's much-touted "job security" provision in the contract amounted to enhanced severance terms during future layoffs or a full plant shutdown.

The strike's outcome underscores that autoworkers at CAMI and other facilities throughout North America must draw the critical lessons from this defeat if it is not to be repeated.

First, under conditions where GM, a transnational company with platforms in 31 countries, produces the same Equinox model manufactured at CAMI in Spring Hill, Tennessee and

Ramos Arizpe and San Luis Potosi, Mexico, the nationalist program promoted by Unifor left autoworkers defenseless against company threats to move production southward.

Second, GM's insistence from the outset of negotiations that due to its right of private ownership of the means of auto production it would not bargain on product volumes or locations, shows that only a political fight guided by a socialist program can move the cause of the working class forward.

Third, such a fight can be waged only in relentless struggle against Unifor and the entire trade union bureaucracy. Autoworkers must break organizationally and politically with Unifor, which has developed a corrupt partnership with the auto bosses and big business. To take their interests forward, workers must build their own independent organizations of struggle to unite the fight to defend jobs and living standards with their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and internationally.

During contract talks, Unifor's sole demand was that GM designate the CAMI plant as the "lead producer" of the Equinox. The union proposed that if jobs had to be shed due to a downturn in auto sales, workers in two Mexican plants should be laid off first. Throughout the course of negotiations, and well before, Unifor executives told workers not to put themselves "on a pedestal" and expect any economic package that would begin to address the succession of concessions contracts that the union has negotiated over the past decade and more.

By the second week of the four-week strike, Mexican newspapers were reporting that additional shifts to produce the Equinox were in operation at Ramos Arizpe and that arrangements were underway to ramp up production further.

Unifor had nothing to offer workers in response, because its primary concern was to retain its cozy relationship with the auto bosses by blocking a joint struggle of Canadian, American and Mexican autoworkers in defence of their common interests. Unifor subordinated the CAMI strike to the maintenance of its close alliance with the big business Liberals, which has developed over the past two decades as a means to suppress the class struggle. Unifor led the charge in 2015 in electing Justin Trudeau, a thoroughly conventional big business politician who combines "progressive" rhetoric with an avowedly right-wing

program of pro-corporate policies, militarism, and attacks on workers' democratic and social rights.

The AFL-CIO, the Canadian Labour Congress, the United Steelworkers, the United Auto Workers and Unifor have all embraced US President Trump's call for "fair trade" and are tirelessly peddling the fraudulent claim that Trudeau and Trump, notorious for his anti-Mexican chauvinism, can be pressured into reaching a deal that will advance workers' interests through the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

But under capitalism there can be no such thing as fair trade, as the corporations do their utmost to beggar their competitors by imposing the most brutal exploitation on their respective labour forces. The pro-capitalist unions are lining up behind this ruthless drive, supporting trade measures aimed at pushing more of the burden of the economic crisis on to "foreign" workers. NAFTA is being used by US and Canadian big business, and their junior partners in Mexico, to pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom. And the unions have been complicit in this, systematically smothering the class struggle and imposing wage and benefit cuts and speed-up in the name of saving "American" or "Canadian" jobs.

During the course of the dispute, Unifor—a union which boasts of having a membership of 300,000—remained stridently opposed to mobilizing the 23,000 autoworkers in the Canadian Detroit Three plants in industrial action in support of the CAMI strike. No appeal was made for solidarity to the hundreds of thousands of autoworkers in the US or Mexico, or the many workers in manufacturing and public sectors across Canada who face similar attacks on their jobs and working conditions.

Unifor's despicable role is in keeping with the politics it has espoused, together with the UAW, over the past three decades. The birth of the CAW sprang directly from the promulgation of a nationalist program that divided North American workers and gave a huge opening for the Big Three auto companies to begin their practice of "whip-sawing" contracts and jobs back and forth across the Canada-US border. Following its 1985 split with the UAW, the CAW based its collaboration with the employers on the labor cost advantages of a weak Canadian dollar and subsidized health care. This "advantage" has since been eliminated through savage wage cuts in the US and the exploitation by the auto giants of even cheaper labour in Mexico. This has intensified a race to the bottom in wages and working conditions, in which Unifor and the UAW seek to outdo each other in offering the auto bosses the cheapest labour costs.

What accounts for this total prostration of the trade unions? A ruling class counteroffensive, rooted in the breakup of the post-war boom, and changes in the character of capitalist production, caused the unions and the social-democratic parties—which for decades had worked to contain the class struggle within the narrow framework of collective bargaining and legislative reforms, that is, within the confines of the capitalist profit

system—to lurch sharply to the right, beginning in the 1980s. The globalization of production and the associated dismantling of much of industry in the advanced countries fatally undermined the ability of the unions to pressure capital for concessions in the national labour market. Union bureaucracies the world over responded by joining with the bosses in demanding workers make their employers more "competitive," i.e., accept concessions, speed-up and job cuts, and promoting economic nationalism.

From the beginning of the strike, the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* fought for the broadest mobilization of the working class behind the CAMI workers. In particular, the newsletter insisted that autoworkers need an international strategy to unite Canadian, US and Mexican workers in a common struggle against the global automakers and the governments in Ottawa, Washington and Mexico City, which back GM's drive to slash labour costs and boost its profits.

Because the newsletter did not act as a shill for Unifor, the union apparatus did all in its power to bar WWSW reporters from the picket lines, remove WWSW articles from Facebook pages and intimidate workers who speak out through the pages of the newsletter. Unable to answer the political criticisms of the WWSW, Unifor escalated its attacks by assaulting an *Autoworker Newsletter* reporter at one of its rallies.

The WWSW *Autoworker Newsletter* urged CAMI workers to elect rank-and-file committees in the plant independent of Unifor to draw up their own demands, including an immediate tripling of strike pay. These committees should take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the Unifor officials and establish lines of communication between CAMI workers and autoworkers in the US, Mexico and throughout the world to mount a common struggle to defend the right to a secure and good-paying job for all workers. In the wake of the strike's defeat, the adoption of this program for struggle takes on a renewed urgency.

Any industrial counteroffensive by workers must be combined with the development of a new political strategy to mobilize the working class in opposition to all the corporate-controlled parties—Liberals, Tories and the New Democratic Party. A new mass socialist party of the working class is needed to fight for the transformation of the auto industry into a publicly owned enterprise as part of the socialist reorganization of the economy to meet human need, not private profit. In this ongoing fight, we urge workers to subscribe to the WWSW *Autoworker Newsletter* and contact the Socialist Equality Party today.



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