

Canadian auto parts workers set to strike Windsor plants

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Auto parts workers in Windsor, Ontario, have voted overwhelmingly to authorize their union, Unifor, to take strike action March 4 when their current contract expires. The workers are employed by Dakkota Integrated Systems, Avancez, HBPO Canada, and ZF Friedrichschafen.

The four plants employ over a thousand workers and supply Windsor's giant Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles' (FCA) minivan facility. Such is the nature of just-in-time type delivery systems that any significant disruption in the parts supply-chain will result in the shutdown of production at Fiat-Chrysler in a matter of days, if not hours.

The parts workers, like their colleagues in the assembly plants, have suffered through a whole series of concessions contracts negotiated by Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). Years of stagnant wages, reduced benefits, the expansion and entrenchment of two-tier hiring, deteriorating working conditions, and an ever-increasing cohort of even lower paid, temporary workers have contributed to a growth of militancy among the rank-and-file. Expectations have been further fueled by the recent \$2.40 increase in the provincial minimum wage that has slashed the differentials between the new \$14 per hour minimum and the only slightly superior wage levels for new hires in the parts plants.

In a pre-emptive statement meant to dampen the demands of the rank-and-file, newly-minted Unifor Local 444 President James Stewart told the *Windsor Star* before strike votes commenced that the workers expectations had been raised too much by the provincial minimum wage hike. "The expectation is for a similar increase," he said. "It's unrealistic for anyone to bargain that type of increase. But the expectations are up, so that would be our challenge."

A union president entering into negotiations with a

public statement that worker wage demands are "unrealistic" should come as no surprise to auto parts workers in the Windsor area. Time and time again, they have seen the most naked collusion with the auto bosses from the Local 444 and Unifor national leaderships in imposing concessions contracts.

Many veteran Dakkota workers will well remember the union-scuttled 2012 strike. That 11-hour walkout was quickly terminated when CAW officials forced a re-vote on a virtually identical contract that had been rejected by 62 percent of the facility's unionized employees only one day before. This shameful "vote until you get it right" episode sheds important light on the Unifor's role in sabotaging and suppressing worker resistance.

When Dakkota workers walked off the job, forcing Fiat-Chrysler production lines to shut down within hours due to a lack of seating parts, CAW bureaucrats expressed their "shock" at the membership's rejection of a union-backed contract proposal. Showing the vast gulf that exists between rank-and-file workers and the union bureaucrats, then Local 444 Vice-President Dino Chiodo complained, "We endorsed it unanimously from the bargaining committee, and we presented it to our membership and they resoundingly said that they are not interested." Local President Rick Laporte announced his opposition to any fight, declaring, "To me, it's like committing suicide. Chrysler isn't going to stay down a whole lot longer before they look elsewhere for a supplier."

By the next morning, FCA CEO Sergio Marchionne had publicly scolded Unifor officials for failing to control their membership. He privately threatened to end a supply contract with Dakkota unless CAW President Ken Lewenza and Local 444 leaders broke the strike. Lewenza complained that his friend "Sergio" was being too hard on the union. His officials were, he stated, blameless and at the receiving end of a bum rap caused by a rebellious

membership. “I’ll have to talk to Sergio about the content of his terminology,” said Lewenza, “because the reality is that since the rejection of the tentative agreement, the CAW representatives have been working around the clock trying to find a resolve.”—i.e. to shut down the strike.

That same morning, workers were herded into an “emergency meeting,” presented with Marchionne’s threat, and ushered into contract voting booths within 30 minutes. Realizing that their industrial action would receive absolutely no support from the organization that ostensibly exists to defend them, they voted by 75 percent to end the strike.

Kudos from management to the CAW officials were quickly forthcoming. The role of the union as a policeman for the company on the shop floor did not go unrecognized. “We appreciate the way in which Local 444 leadership worked together with our negotiating team in an environment of trust and mutual respect while protecting the interests of their members,” declared a statement from Dakkota. “Getting the difficult situation resolved was a collaborative effort, recognizing the implications a long-term strike would have for all of us.”

For his part, Local 444 President Laporte slavishly promised Marchionne that his union would continue to do all it could for the company’s best interests, stating, “The commitment that we lost means we will have to gain the confidence of Chrysler Corporation. This particular work group was a shining star in the corporation’s eyes before the rejection yesterday.”

Workers should also recall the treacherous role Unifor played in the 2016 strike at Windsor’s Integram Seating feeder facility for FCA Windsor Assembly and GM CAMI in Ingersoll. Integram workers walked off the job on a Sunday afternoon after rejecting a tentative agreement unanimously recommended by Unifor Local 444 officials. The workers, many of them new hires earning a paltry \$17.33 per hour and growing in to only \$24.76 in the eleventh year of service, opposed a deal that not only cemented the two-tier system, but also increased their payments into the benefits plan and included a meagre general wage “rise” that barely kept up with inflation.

Visibly angered by the workers’ defiance, then Local 444 President Chiodo and the rest of the leadership went into overdrive to end the strike.

Speaking like a company accountant, Chiodo told the *Windsor Star* shortly after picket lines went up, “We will set up meetings (with the company) as soon as we can to figure out how we can mitigate any type of losses.”

Denouncing the rebellious workers as “in need of an education,” Chiodo, within hours, announced that a new agreement had been reached. Before a vote had even been held, he instructed pickets to withdraw so as to allow vital parts shipments for GM CAMI to leave the plant, ordered morning shift workers to report for duty to ensure supplies to FCA, and arranged for a snap re-vote for that same afternoon on a deal that was virtually identical to the one rejected the previous day. An increased signing bonus was presented as “encouragement” and the deal was passed.

The role of Local 444 is by no means exceptional. Across the auto sector and in every economic area where Unifor operates, it has overseen the imposition of vicious attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions, while trumpeting a nationalist program to “defend Canadian jobs” that only serves to divide workers in Canada from their brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and around the world.

Auto parts workers preparing a strike for decent wages and benefits must take the measure of Unifor. The actions of the union, in auto parts and in the decades of concessions contracts rammed through across the entire auto industry, only underscore the fact that it cannot be reformed and forced to respond to the needs of auto workers. Over the last three decades, Unifor, like the entire trade union bureaucracy, has been transformed into a pro-company organization, controlled by an upper-middle class layer of highly paid officials who answer only to the corporations and the government, and have a direct interest in intensifying the exploitation of the workers they claim to represent.

The only way forward for workers is to break decisively with this anti-working class organization and build rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to Unifor. These committees must begin making plans for job action immediately, above all by appealing for support from auto parts workers at other facilities, the more than 20,000 autoworkers at FCA, Ford and GM in Canada, and autoworkers throughout North America.



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