

Canadian auto parts workers strike in Windsor

Carl Bronski
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About 450 auto parts workers at Dakkota Integrated Systems and HBPO in Windsor, Ontario went on strike Sunday morning after Unifor negotiators failed to reach an agreement based on the pattern set at Avancez—one of four auto parts companies that supply the giant Windsor Fiat-Chrysler minivan plant. Several hundred workers at ZF Friedrichschafen, the fourth supplier company, are set to strike Monday morning should no settlement be obtained.

Due to the nature of just-in-time delivery processes at Fiat-Chrysler's Windsor Assembly, production of the Pacifica and the Dodge Grand Caravan at the plant could be quickly shut down. It is for this reason that Unifor is expected to attempt to wind up the strike as quickly as possible. In previous strikes by parts workers at Windsor Assembly feeder plants in 2012 and 2016, Unifor quickly responded to demands from Fiat-Chrysler management to immediately resume production and ram through contracts at hastily convened "emergency meetings."

The workers at all four feeder plants voted by almost 100 percent to strike for better pay, benefits and working conditions last month.

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."

That a union official, supposedly representing the workers should announce as negotiations begin that the demands of his membership were "unrealistic" is just the latest proof—if more proof is needed—that Unifor acts as a junior partner of the corporations to increase shareholder profits and suppress the wages and benefits of the auto workers. Under conditions where workers are in a powerful position to press home demands for a significant pay increase and improved benefits and working conditions, Unifor will act with all due speed to prevent production shortfalls at Fiat Chrysler's Windsor Assembly.

A team of *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* reporters visited HBPO picket lines on Sunday afternoon in Windsor, just blocks from the Chrysler minivan plant. The 120 workers there make front-end modules for FCA's Pacifica and Grand Caravan models.

Unifor had placed a gag order on pickets, directing all inquiries to Unifor officials. However, a Unifor official on the picket line refused to make any statement, saying "we know who you are." He delivered an announcement to workers that there had been no progress in negotiations, but that Unifor and management were still meeting and there would be another update soon, indicating the strike might soon be wrapped up before there was any impact on Chrysler production.

One worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter* that the

plant is a tier one supplier. “There is a major amount of support. We are getting workers down here from different factories.” He noted that the workers were being told nothing about the content of negotiations by Unifor. “They won’t know anything until we go into ratification,” he said.

A worker from Syncreon Automotive in Windsor came down to the picket line to support the HBPO workers. He said his plant produced ignitions and other components for the Windsor minivan plant. He said that “I am very interested in patterning agreements,” indicating that the lower, “grow in” wage was a major issue.

A worker from the nearby Flex-N-Gate plant also came down to show his support. He issued the following warning to workers at HBPO. “Here the unions stand with management. All the auto parts plants around here are under Unifor.”

He explained that workers at his plant had experienced being sold out. “That is what happened to us 8 years ago. Unifor stuck with management. They told us we had to sign the agreement or the company would move. They get bonuses from management. The unions never do anything for the workers. I am paying \$60 a month in dues for nothing.”

Despite the attempt by Unifor to silence the WSWS, a number of strikers gave statements of solidarity with striking West Virginia teachers.

One HBPO worker said, “I say to the teachers, just stay strong. There is safety in numbers.”

Workers were angered by the attempts of the teacher unions to force West Virginia teachers back to work with an inferior contract. “Those teachers don’t have anyone fighting for them,” one exclaimed.

Another worker pointed to the experience of 12,000 Ontario College faculty who struck for five weeks last fall and were ultimately forced back to work under strikebreaking legislation enacted by the union backed Liberal government. Speaking of the role of the unions she said, “It is the same as what they did at the colleges. They didn’t end up getting anything.”

A Flex-N-Gate worker added, “It’s a good first step. They should stay out and keep going. It is not just West Virginia. There are problems across the whole US. look at all the school shootings. Even here in Canada the students struggle with education. They have a hard time. A lot of kids quit school because they can’t

afford it.”

Workers should be forewarned. Unifor has no intention of bringing before the membership a contract that meets any of their demands. The lessons of the scuttled strikes at Dakkota in 2012 and Integram Seating in 2016 that once again imposed miserable concessions deals must stand as a warning to striking workers today.

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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