

Unifor scuttles Windsor auto parts strikes

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About two hours past midnight on Monday morning, Unifor Local 444 president James Stewart announced that tentative agreements had been reached with auto parts makers Dakkota Integrated Systems and HBPO. Brief strikes at both companies had begun on Sunday morning after management at the two firms initially refused to sign on to a pattern contract that Unifor had negotiated with Avancez, another parts supplier, that same weekend. A fourth parts maker, ZF-TRW had already signed on to the deal hours before its Monday morning strike deadline had been reached.

Last month the four plants, which employ about 1,000 workers in total, voted by nearly 100 percent for strike action to enforce demands for significant pay and benefits increases after years of enduring concessionary deals. In a blatant stab in the back Unifor president Stewart signalled his intentions to the companies by publicly announcing well before the contract deadlines that such demands were “unrealistic”.

All four suppliers feed Fiat Chrysler Automobiles’ (FCA) giant Windsor Assembly plant which employs over 6,000 workers. Under the just-in-time delivery system, FCA would run out of parts within hours for its Dodge Grand Caravans and its hot-selling Pacifica minivan under conditions where February sales for the vehicle increased by 24 percent. Unifor signed off on tentative agreements with Dakkota and HBPO about two hours after production started up at Fiat-Chrysler’s midnight shift.

The methods used by Unifor at the Windsor parts plants to scuttle the strikes have come to be known by workers across North America as “Hollywood strikes”—a bit of industrial theater to give the impression that the union “means business” whilst in reality attempting to defuse the militancy among workers. After all, it is impossible that workers could have wrenched any concessions from the feeder plants on the basis of a strike that was called off before it had

any significant impact on the bottom lines of the auto parts makers and FCA’s assembly operations (see also: “Unifor scuttles strike at Integram Seating plant in a matter of hours”).

That the events in Windsor over the weekend were nothing more than a cynical shadow play was demonstrated by Stewart at his press interview announcing the end of the strikes. FCA, which in years gone by had many of these auto parts jobs insourced within the company before spinning them out to low-wage parts suppliers, was the union’s valued “partner” and ace-in-the-hole—not the militancy of the parts workers. A call from Fiat Chrysler management was all it took to end the strike. “As we got closer to production at Chrysler,” said the local president, “we knew they would get involved in the conversation. We knew that’s when the most pressure was on the companies to meet the pattern established before the deadline.”

By shutting down the strike only hours after production started at Windsor Assembly and before any vote has been taken on the pattern deal, Unifor is seeking to take the initiative out of the hands of workers and hand it back to the corporations. Workers at all four feeder facilities will vote on the tentative agreements this coming Thursday. The contracts—or in reality, simply the self-serving “highlights”—will not be released to them for study and discussion until just before the Thursday vote in an effort to prevent any organized resistance to the deals.

The recent increase in the provincial minimum wage to \$14 per hour (and to \$15 next year) has greatly reduced the wage differentials between the lowest paid workers in the province and workers in the auto parts industry. Temporary workers hired into the parts plants barely make more than the minimum. Newer hires on inferior tiered contracts do not do much better. Even a line leader, for instance at Dakkota, told reporters that

he earns just under \$20 per hour.

Workers must take the measure of Unifor as nothing but an arm of the corporations within their ranks. Preparations must be immediately made to organize militant rank-and-file members into committees that are ready to resist what is lining up to be yet another miserable contract offer.



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