

Fiat-Chrysler minivan plant impacted

Windsor auto parts workers defy Unifor and strike

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By a resounding 62 percent, three hundred auto parts workers at Windsor, Ontario's ZF-TRW facility on Thursday night rejected a contract "pattern" offer recommended by Unifor. Picket lines were set up by early Friday morning. The impact was felt within hours at the giant Fiat-Chrysler Windsor Assembly Plant that produces the Pacifica minivan and the Dodge Grand Caravan.

After very limited production on Friday, Fiat-Chrysler announced that all Saturday production would be shutdown, idling over 6,000 autoworkers at the facility until further notice.

The vote is a further indication of a mood of rebellion in the working class that found its expression in recent weeks in the state-wide walkout by more than 30,000 West Virginia teachers and public employees and the movement toward strike action by teachers in Oklahoma and other states. After decades of concessions workers are determined to take a stand against a further decline in living conditions.

On Thursday, Unifor conducted contract ratification votes for workers at three other parts suppliers that also feed Windsor Assembly. Avancez and Dakkota workers voted 78 percent to accept the new contract. HBPO workers ratified the deal by a narrow 56 percent. Last weekend, Dakkota and HBPO struck briefly when their contracts expired before Unifor and the respective company managements agreed to a tentative settlement that shut down the job actions before Fiat-Chrysler production could be affected.

ZF-TRW makes transmission systems, front and rear components, chassis systems, electronics, sensors and safety technology. The workers sub-assemble shocks, struts, springs and suspensions for use at Windsor

Assembly. With the suspension of production at Fiat-Chrysler, it is expected that hundreds of other auto parts workers will ultimately see their own shifts curtailed as the system of just-in-time shipment of supplies backs up.

The "pattern" agreement agreed to by Unifor called for a meagre \$2 per hour increase spread out over a three-year period, an almost negligible half point increase in company payments to the defined contribution pension scheme and no improvement in the already inferior benefits program. When projected inflation is factored in, the deal amounts to a real wage cut over the life of the agreement. Most workers in the plant currently earn a near poverty \$19.40 (CDN) per hour. Newly hired and temporary employees receive even less. Expectations amongst many workers were running high after the province hiked the Ontario minimum wage by \$2.40 to \$14 per hour in January with another \$1 boost scheduled for next year.

Unifor Local President James Stewart publicly denounced the "unreasonable" expectations of the workers last month even as negotiations began, a brazen stab in the back and signal to management that the union would sabotage any struggle. On Thursday night, a glum-faced Stewart admitted that the financials in the proposed deal lay behind workers rejection of the settlement. On Friday, Stewart continued his efforts to lower expectations. When reporters asked if a revised settlement at ZF would impact the deals previously ratified at the other parts companies. Stewart replied that "the culture has always been the pattern".

Left unsaid was the understanding that historically pattern agreements were meant to ensure that significant gains by workers at one employer would be

extended to workers at other companies in the industry. But now, and for a generation and more, auto union officials have stood that principle on its head, defending pattern bargaining as a means to ensure that a miserable contract at one company must be imposed at all others. When workers at one facility threaten to disrupt these company-friendly arrangements, Unifor has sought to end strikes by adding or slightly increasing a signing bonus or making cosmetic changes to work arrangements, whilst leaving the essential features of the rejected deal intact.

Stewart blurted out as much Thursday when trying to explain the ZF-TRW no vote. "Some people wanted more in terms of finances. We have to go through a pattern and look at everything that was said today and go through our notes, see if there are any workplace issues we can resolve, but ultimately it just wasn't enough," he says.

A World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter reporting team visited the ZF-TRW picket line in Windsor Friday. The WSWS reporters explained that workers were taking a courageous stand by voting down the contract proposed by Unifor and going out on strike and were in a powerful position to rally support from other sections of workers. They warned that Unifor would try to end the strike as quickly as possible as it did last weekend when workers at Dakkota integrated systems and HBPO walked out.

Several workers nodded in agreement when reporters stated that there had to be opposition to the continuous lowering of living standards, including the spread of temporary and part time labor and two-tier wages. The WSWS pointed out that workers in 2015 had rebelled against the United Autoworkers attempt to impose a sellout agreement. It had since been demonstrated that Fiat Chrysler management had paid top UAW officials more than \$1 million to obtain company friendly agreements.

ZF-TRW workers told the WSWS that they had been instructed by Unifor not to discuss any issues relating to their strike with reporters. The WSWS warned that the gag order was an attempt by Unifor to isolate their strike and keep them from reaching out to other workers. A number of strikers nonetheless took the autoworker newsletter with reports on the West Virginia teachers struggle and the aborted strikes at Dakkota and HBPO last week.

The rejection of the sellout deal that Unifor attempted to foist on ZF-TRW auto parts workers is a reflection of the simmering anger in the working class over decades of concessions and attacks on living standards. For this struggle to be successful it must serve as the starting point for a broader mobilization of auto workers. This requires a break with Unifor, which is doing everything to suppress and isolate the struggle, and the election of an independent strike committee.

Workers should demand the overturning of the deals signed at the Windsor area parts plants and launch a united struggle for substantial gains in wages, the restoration of cost of living increases, full funding for pensions, the abolition of the two tier wage system and an end to the use of low paid temporary and part time workers.

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