Unifor shuts down ZF-TRW auto parts strike in Windsor, Canada

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About 300 workers at Windsor, Ontario auto parts supplier ZF-TRW voted by 87 percent on Sunday to end a 60-hour work stoppage. Workers had struck the plant early Friday morning after rejecting by 62 percent a tentative pattern contract recommended by their union, Unifor. ZF-TRW is a key feeder plant to Windsor's giant Fiat-Chrysler auto assembly facility which builds the Pacifica and Dodge Caravan. Production there was slowed Friday and completely idled on Saturday due to a lack of parts in the just-in-time delivery process.

The revised contract placed in front of ZF workers on Sunday morning was virtually identical to the deal they rejected on Thursday night but accepted by workers at three other companies supplying parts to Fiat-Chrysler. So determined was Unifor to end the strike and restore its standing with the auto bosses as a guarantor of "labour peace," that it brought retired Canadian Auto Workers union national president, Ken Lewenza, out of moth-balls to lobby hard for the contract's passage as ZF workers arrived to vote.

Unifor officials refused to alter the economic centerpiece of the agreement, but in an effort to quickly wind-up the strike made adjustments to some local contract language that allowed for more flexibility in time-off applications and signing bonus/Christmas bonus payment scheduling and reduced the number of ZF workers assigned to multiple jobs.

The stand by the ZF-TRW workers evoked support from other auto workers in Windsor, who have suffered years of concessions including the imposition of a two-tier wage structure with a 10-year "grow in" period. One Windsor Assembly tier two worker said of the ZF-TRW strike, "I definitely support them. You have to stand up." She said that was a sentiment broadly shared at the plant. "A lot of workers were saying, yes, 'fight for what you need, fight for what you believe in!'

"We definitely understood. Some workers joined them on the picket line."

She said the in-progression wages remained a big issue at Windsor Assembly as it does for parts workers. They have brought in 2,000 new hires since they started production of the Pacifica. "10 years for a "grow in" is ridiculous. We are all doing the same jobs.

"Not only are we making less money, we don't get SUB (supplemental unemployment benefits) for 5 years. If you get laid off, that hurts. We are not even getting the equivalent of minimum wage (on standard unemployment pay).

"They are not only saving on wages, they are saving on benefits. I know what the benefits here used to be, and our benefits now are very substandard. They might raise our pay a little, but then they hit us on benefits."

With the conclusion of the strike, two truckloads of parts were immediately dispatched to Windsor Assembly, which then re-started production Sunday night.

Unifor had initially bargained what it characterized as a "pattern agreement" with Avancez—one of four parts companies that supply material to Fiat-Chrysler. But when that deal was placed in front of Dakkota and HBPO management last week, those corporations initially balked, sparking a brief walkout by workers at those two plants when the contract expired without a new agreement. A quick intervention by Fiat-Chrysler—no doubt with threats on future purchasing agreements—convinced Dakkota and HBPO management to agree to the Avancez pattern. ZF-TRW management also agreed to the proposed pattern prior to the initial Thursday rejection of the contract by workers in that company.

The pattern agreement signed by Unifor, now with all

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four feeder companies, calls for a $2 per hour increase spread out over a three-year period, a one point increase in company payments to the defined contribution pension scheme beginning in 2019 and virtually no improvement in the already inferior benefits program. Most workers in the plant had earned a near poverty $19.40 (CDN) per hour prior to the strike. The new hourly wage for assemblers comes in at $20.15. Second tier new hires earn 15 percent less for the first two years of employment. Temporary workers earn 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) that thereby greatly reduced the wage differentials between the lowest paid workers in the province and workers in the auto parts industry.

Unifor signalled to management early in the bargaining process that it had no intention of leading workers in a fight to seriously redress decades of concessions contracts in the parts industry when Local 444 President James Stewart last month publicly denounced the so-called “unreasonable” wage expectations of workers.

Over the course of the past week, Unifor made even more clear its retrograde view of so-called “pattern bargaining.” James Stewart made plain in several statements to reporters that it was against the union’s “culture” to have one bargaining unit win superior wages and benefits through strike action that would supersede an inferior “pattern” deal.

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. Stewart and the entire union officialdom stand 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.

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