

Lear auto parts workers speak out against UAW-backed sellout contract proposal

Marcus Day
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One week after auto parts workers at Lear Corporation's Hammond and Portage, Indiana plants overwhelmingly rejected a contract backed by the United Auto Workers union, sentiment continues to build for a fight to overturn the tier system and years of concessions in wages and benefits.

After UAW Local 2335 announced that a tentative agreement with Lear had been reached on October 3, the union stonewalled workers' demands to review details of the contract prior to voting on it October 14, with local President Jaime Luna insisting, "Everything is done at the ratification meeting."

Workers had every right to be suspicious. In 2014, following a 24-hour strike, the UAW trumpeted claims that it had secured the elimination of the two-tier system at the Hammond plant. Within days of the contract being ratified, however, workers learned that they had been swindled, and that the UAW had agreed to the creation of a new class of "sub-assembly" workers earning even lower pay who were to be moved to a plant in Portage.

Following the decisive rejection of this year's deal by 74 percent, the UAW has refused to explain why it had backed a proposal workers overwhelmingly opposed. Instead, Local 2335 sought to stave off workers' anger by holding a series of phony "ratification feedback" meetings last week.

In an indication of the nervousness in corporate circles over the possibility of the struggle at Lear sparking a broader rebellion among workers, both the national and local media have maintained a news blackout on the rejection of the contract.

Workers should be under no illusions that the UAW can be pressured to fight for their interests and return with a deal that ends the tier system and provides a decent standard of living. Over the last 40 years, the UAW has proved that it is no longer, in even a limited sense, an organization that defends workers' interests. Instead, it

has demonstrated itself to be a corrupt tool of corporate management, which accepts bribes, suppresses strikes, extracts concessions from workers, and enforces the profit interests of the companies.

In order to conduct a real struggle for their interests, workers must form their own organizations, rank-and-file factory committees, democratically controlled and independent of the union, and appeal to the thousands of other workers at Ford, Fiat Chrysler, US Steel, UPS, Amazon and elsewhere to carry out a joint fight. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers who agree with the perspective to contact us to learn more about how to get involved.

While neither the UAW nor Lear has released any details of the deal, over the last week workers have contacted the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* and taken to social media to denounce various aspects of the agreement.

One worker said that the deal would have enabled the company to shift workers more easily between different jobs in the plant, with the threat of termination held over the head of workers unable to perform. "They want everyone to learn 10 to 16 jobs so everyone has to rotate. We have tall people jobs and short people jobs, so I'm not sure how that is going to work. Word is that if you can't do a job, you can be voted off by the team. If you're voted off all rows, you're fired."

Another worker commented on Facebook that the proposed raises in the contract would have been \$1.74 an hour over four years for just-in-time workers and \$2.25 an hour for sub-assembly workers. These measly sums would have been less than or slightly above the rate of inflation, and as many have noted, signified a slap in the face by a company that is raking in massive profits. The worker continued, "The company has made lots of money, let them give back to us in our 401K, a pension plan, cost of living, maybe an extra week of vacation for

20 years or more.”

Reporters for the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* spoke to workers about the contract struggle at Lear’s Hammond plant Saturday afternoon.

“We’ve been going without a contract since August,” said a worker with five years at the plant. In an indication of widespread opposition to the contract among those who abstained from the first vote, he said, “I live in Chicago, and the ratification meeting was held in Valparaiso [Indiana, approximately 50 miles away], and I had to work that night too. So they wanted me to come all the way from Chicago, go all the way to Valparaiso, vote, go all the way back home and come back to work. That was too much, I wasn’t going to do all that. I’m not the only one, a lot of people didn’t vote.”

He said he was opposed to both the divisions between workers, and the punitive point system, in which workers are often sanctioned for unavoidable work absences. “They need to get rid of all the tiers in my opinion, and the point system. If you get sick right now, they can hold it against us, which I don’t understand.

“Another thing they do, which I REALLY don’t like: Indiana will close their roads when the weather gets real bad, like if we get snow. And sometimes we get over 30 inches of snow. So if they close the roads, how am I going to get to work? But they hold it against me, say I’m absent that day, and I get a point for it. How can you hold that against me, when I’m trying to get to work but I can’t? I can’t control the weather! I think that’s setting you up for failure.

“I’ve also heard is they’re talking about our insurance going up. Now, it’s over \$100 premium a month right now just for one person, and I think that’s too much. And every time I go see a doctor, it’s a \$20 co-pay. Every time I see a specialist, it’s \$40.

“Lear can afford to let go of some stuff. They’re a Fortune 500 company, and they don’t want to give enough to their employees? That’s telling me that you’ve got executives and people in high places that have summer and winter homes, and they want to keep them.”

Reporters for the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* also spoke to workers at Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant Saturday about the situation at Lear. The company’s Hammond facility, only a few miles from Ford’s factory, supplies the seats for vehicles assembled at Chicago Assembly.

The *WSWS* article on the contract rejection—“Indiana Lear auto parts workers overwhelmingly reject UAW-backed contract proposal”—has also been shared widely

among Chicago Ford workers on Facebook, and there is wide support for the stand taken by their brothers and sisters at Lear.

A short-term supplemental (STS) worker—one of the numerous tiers expanded following the UAW’s imposition of sellout contracts at the Detroit Three auto companies in 2015—said that he agreed with Lear workers’ rejection of the contract. “I get it, I wouldn’t have voted for it either. I’ll tell you this, if Ford comes with a contract next year telling us we’re only going to get a dollar over the next four years, I guarantee you, we’re not going for it.”

Speaking about the company’s demands for speedup in advance of the planned idling of the plant in 2019 (which is also expected to impact production at Lear), he continued, “We’re going to be shutting down in March for the retooling [for the 2020 Ford Explorer and Lincoln Aviator models], and you can absolutely tell they’re trying to get as many cars out of here as possible before then.” He said that as an STS employee, he would not receive any supplemental unemployment benefit pay during the shutdown of the plant, and would have to survive on state unemployment benefits.

When asked whether he thought the UAW represented his interests, he immediately responded, “No. Whatever you were even going to say after that, just no.”

He continued, “I don’t understand why there are people here for two and a half years as STSs for a billion-dollar company. Actually, a billions-of-dollars company. You’ve got \$900 million to dump into a plant, but you’ve got people that are working on nothing.

“I think it’s ridiculous that you start here at about \$15.87 an hour, but minimum wage in Chicago is \$12 an hour, and it’s going up to \$13 next year. How is it that I’m building cars that are selling for \$50,000 a piece, but my cut of it is \$15.87?”



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