

Autoworkers must prepare fight as UAW plans new givebacks in 2019 contracts

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Anger is boiling in the auto factories over GM's announced plans to close five factories, including the Detroit-Hamtramck facility, the Lordstown, Ohio plant and the Oshawa, Ontario factory, as part of a drive to cut 14,000 jobs. Ford has meanwhile announced it is eliminating a shift, 1,000 jobs, at its Flat Rock Assembly Plant south of Detroit.

The demonstration held Saturday, February 9 in Detroit called by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees against the GM plant closures was the first response of class-conscious workers aimed at mobilizing broad resistance. It was organized in explicit opposition to the pro-company United Auto Workers and won widespread support among workers in the US and internationally, including the striking maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico.

In reaction against this United Auto Workers President Gary Jones wrote an op-ed column published in the February 10 issue of the *Detroit Free Press* in which he tried to get autoworkers to believe that the union "has their back." Pointing to upcoming contract talks with Ford, GM and Fiat Chrysler to replace the four-year agreements that expire on September 14, Jones claimed the UAW would conduct "a major battle at the bargaining table to keep the plants open and save union jobs."

At the same time, Jones resorted to the UAW's stock-in-trade of seeking to deflect workers' anger by railing against foreign workers, denouncing GM for expanding production in China and Mexico. Significantly, Jones made no mention of the threatened closure of GM's Oshawa plant outside Toronto in Canada.

The idea that the UAW would fight to defend anything other than the interests of the corrupt union executives would be laughable if the issues were not so serious for autoworkers, their families and the communities facing devastation due to plant closures. Autoworkers have watched over the last four decades as the UAW has negotiated one concessionary "job saving" agreement after another with the result that hundreds of thousands of jobs have been eliminated, while workers' living standards and

shop floor rights have been decimated.

As for the supposed pledge obtained by the UAW from newly-elected Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer to oppose GM plant shutdowns, the governor, a long-time shill for big business, didn't even bother to mention the issue in her State of the State address this week.

The contract talks are not a contest between antagonists, but a conspiracy of the auto bosses and the UAW against the workers. What the UAW calls negotiations are behind-the-scenes maneuvers where high-level operatives haggle over what portion of the profits pumped out of autoworkers and stolen from their wages and benefits will be funneled into the bank accounts of the UAW. This is the purpose of the various joint training funds and programs funded by the auto companies and the millions of dollars in bribes paid to top UAW officials, as revealed in the ongoing corruption scandal.

Writing in the wake of GM's plant closing announcement in November, *Automotive News* called the job cuts a shot across the bow aimed at forcing workers to, in the words of an analyst, "focus on jobs and survival" in 2019 rather than contract gains. It cynically added, "But if any of the plants are saved, union members should read the fine print in the contract. Expect GM to demand untraditional employment practices such as an increase in temporary, subcontracted or outsourced workers."

Both the auto companies and the UAW are determined to purge the factories of older "legacy" workers, who have higher wages, health and pension benefits, and replace them with low-paid workers who pay dues but have few if any rights. In the 2015 negotiations the UAW agreed to remove limits on the number of temporary part-time workers, who are essentially casual workers who could be disposed of without cost in case of downsizing.

It is also likely that a new effort will be made to relieve the corporations of their health care obligations altogether by establishing a union-controlled scheme to manage medical benefits for active workers, similar to the VEBA retiree health care program, which is funded by billions in auto

company stock. Well aware that the UAW had cut benefits to retirees after taking over their health plans, there was near-universal opposition to extending this to current workers. This was a major factor behind the initial defeat of the 2015 UAW-FCA contract, which forced the corporations and the UAW to drop the demand.

There is no time to lose. Preparations must be made now by workers to assert their own interests in opposition to the gang up of corporate management and the UAW. In preparing for a fight, workers must begin with the understanding that in the UAW they face an enemy just as bitter and unrelenting as management. In every factory, workers should elect rank-and-file oversight committees to sit in on all the contract talks and report regularly to workers in the factories. This is the only way to prevent backroom deals that are rammed through against the will of workers.

At the same time, rank-and-file committees, independent of the UAW and Unifor, must be built to mobilize the broadest opposition, including mass demonstrations, strikes and plant occupations, to prevent the shutdown of the GM plants, resist demands for new concessions and to restore all UAW-backed concessions.

Meetings in the factories and on social media must be organized to formulate a list of demands that begins with the needs of workers, not the interests of the corporations and the UAW. This includes a 40 percent wage increase to compensate for the increased cost of living, the abolition of all tiers, the conversion of part-time and contract workers to full-time regulars, and the rehiring of all laid-off and victimized workers. To break the dictatorship of the corporations and their UAW police force in the factories workers must fight for industrial democracy, including workers' control over health and safety as well as line speed.

In waging this fight it is critical that workers review the bitter lessons of the 2015 sellout negotiated in secret by the UAW.

The claim by Jones that the UAW is focused on jobs can mean nothing but the imposition of huge new concessions. In 2015 the UAW agreed to a new lower sub-tier wage at three Ford plants, including the Sterling Axle, Woodhaven Stamping and Rawsonville powertrain plants in suburban Detroit. New workers at these plants would max out at a wage about \$10 an hour less than “legacy” workers in 2019. At the Woodhaven plant, new workers can make as little as \$9 an hour under a “competitive wage structure” agreed to by the UAW.

These brutal conditions played a role in the death of temporary part-time worker Jacoby Hennings, who police claimed shot himself after an unexplained dispute with UAW officials at the Woodhaven Stamping plant in October

2017. Another young worker, Davion Rice, died at the Sterling Axle plant last September in circumstances that have still not been fully explained.

In 2010, the UAW attempted to force through an agreement on workers at the General Motors Indianapolis Stamping plant imposing a 50 percent wage cut, claiming it was necessary to keep the facility open under new ownership. After workers voted three times to reject the cuts, the UAW allowed GM to close the plant without opposition.

The February 9 demonstration organized by the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees and the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* laid out the strategy for the coming struggle. First, workers must organize independently of the corporate-controlled unions and fight for the broadest mobilization of not just autoworkers but all sections of the working class.

Second, this is an international fight. It is not possible to fight globally-organized corporations on a national basis. Rank-and-file committees in the US must link up with workers in Canada, Mexico, Europe, Asia, South America and Africa to wage a common fight to defend jobs and living standards.

Finally, this a fight not just against this or that employer but against the entire capitalist system, which subordinates the needs of the working class—the vast majority of the planet’s population—to the relentless drive by the corporate and financial oligarchy for more private wealth.

The fight to defend jobs and for industrial democracy raises the question of who should run the factories. The insistence that workers have the inalienable right to a good-paying and secure job is an implicit challenge to the “right” of Wall Street and wealthy stockholders to own and control giant industries and to close them and destroy entire communities whenever they choose.

The broadest industrial mobilization of the working class against plant shutdowns must go hand in hand with the organization of a political fight based on a socialist program directed toward the transformation of the auto factories into public utilities under the democratic ownership and control of the working class.

Workers interested in learning more about this fight should contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.



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