

“We want to get back everything we gave up”

Autoworkers determined to fight as contract talks open

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On Monday morning, executives from the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Ford Motor Co. will do their ritual handshakes in front of the news cameras at the company’s Dearborn, Michigan headquarters. Along with similar stage-managed affairs on Tuesday at the headquarters of General Motors and Fiat Chrysler, this will mark the beginning of the “bargaining” for new labor contracts for 155,000 GM, Ford and FCA workers.

The corporate press is referring to the upcoming talks as the “toughest” since GM and Chrysler went through bankruptcy restructuring in 2009. This is not because they expect any intransigence to the companies’ demands from the UAW. On the contrary, the UAW has done the corporations’ bidding for four decades.

What the media fears is that the strategy long employed by the corporations and the UAW of using plant closings and mass layoffs to blackmail workers into accepting concessions will not work this time, particularly since the companies are flush with profits.

After years of wage and benefit concessions, which have resulted in a 25 percent loss in real income since 2002, autoworkers are determined to recoup their losses and win substantial improvements in pay, benefits and working conditions. The current four-year labor agreements expire in mid-September.

Asked by the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* what workers wanted in the new contracts, one worker emailed: “Getting back everything we gave up. Not having to work every Saturday. COLA [Cost of Living Adjustment]. The attendance program is ridiculous.”

Another wrote: “I work at Ford Chicago assembly plant and I want my 8 hour work day back ... No more mandatory 12 hour days with no overtime until 10 and then it’s only time and a half. They call this a Union UAW job, what a joke.”

Another added: “There needs to be a fight to increase pensions for retirees. Give them something. They began the

fight for all the members. Don’t forget them now.”

Abolishing the multi-tier wage and benefit system was primary, said Joe, a worker at the Chicago Ford plant. “We have six different categories of workers between ‘short-term’ and ‘long-term’ part-time workers, then ‘entry-level,’ ‘in-progression,’ and ‘legacy workers.’ It’s divide-and-conquer not the ‘brotherhood’ the UAW claims to preach.”

Sheri, a Jeep worker in Detroit who is also a young single mother, said workers wanted a change in the absentee and discipline policy, which “was designed for you to fail.” There are so many things workers have to do with their children or other family problems, she said: “but if you accumulate points for absences or being tardy, they can just terminate you. That’s how they get rid of higher-paid workers and replace them with temps.”

The concessions President Obama imposed on autoworkers—the halving of new hires’ wages, the elimination of overtime payments after eight hours, handing over the provision of retiree health care benefits to the UAW, which immediately cut them, and a vast expansion of part-time temporary workers—was used as the template to drive down the wages and conditions of workers across the whole economy.

A fightback by autoworkers threatens to overturn the whole regime of low wages, precarious “gig economy” employment and cuts to health care and pensions, that has been central to booming corporate profits and the rise of the New York Stock Exchange to a record 27,000 points last week.

The media mouthpieces of the corporations and the UAW are therefore developing a new narrative to justify demands for more concessions. According to them, the auto industry is going through another “transformational” change with the advent of electric and self-driving vehicles. Workers must dial back their expectations because companies need to save for future investments.

If workers are not “reasonable,” their plants and jobs will disappear. “Ask the folks who manned the assembly line at GM’s Lordstown Assembly Plant,” *Detroit News* columnist Daniel Howes warned workers last week. “In less than the life of their current contract, their sprawling plant in northeast Ohio went from running three shifts building the Chevrolet Cruze compact to none, effectively idled now and awaiting closure.”

The vast profits extracted from workers, however, are not being plowed into new technologies but into the pockets of the companies’ richest Wall Street investors. Over the last four years, Ford has generated an average annual net profit of \$5.8 billion. In the last three years, it has rewarded shareholders with average annual dividend payments of about \$3 billion. In the last five years, GM has made an average of \$16.4 billion in gross profits and has spent over a third on dividend payments and stock buybacks.

But Wall Street is still not satisfied. In particular, investors have punished Ford stock, driving the price down 50 percent last year. Ford would have a hard time “pleading poverty,” Art Schwartz, president of Ann Arbor, Michigan-based consulting firm Labor and Economics Associates and former general director of labor relations for GM, told *Insider Louisville*. However, the company wants workers to pay more for health insurance since its health care costs are projected to exceed \$1 billion for its US hourly workers next year.

The *Automotive News* previously reported that GM is planning a huge expansion in the number of low-paid contract workers—with a former executive saying the company wants half of its work done by temps—as well as a sharp increase in out-of-pocket costs workers must pay for health benefits.

In 2015, the effort to extend UAW control of health care from retirees to hourly workers was one of the key factors in the defeat by workers of the first UAW-backed national contract in three decades. In a completely cynical fashion, the union and the company are seeking to use the opioid crisis and its horrific impact on autoworkers and their families to smuggle a UAW-controlled health care scheme back into the contract.

“The union is seeking an expansion of employer-funded, union-administered assistance programs aimed at preventing the use of prescription painkillers from turning into harmful, long-term dependence,” the *Automotive News* reported last week. The UAW is “looking for anything they can do to try to help save costs and keep plants in the United States,” Arthur Wheaton, director of the Worker Institute at Cornell University, told the industry publication. “If [the high cost of opioid treatment] is a barrier for them to have more workers, they’ll want to work together.”

As one worker commented: “They’re gonna act like they give a damn now that contract time is upon us? This will be their ploy to screw the workers over once again. And when we complain, the workers will look like the arseholes. The union is so corrupt!”

Another wrote: “The health care plans administered by the UAW (and everyone else) are one of the reasons opioid addiction is even an issue. Anyone with an injury, work related or not, must do the very long HMO PPO dance in order to finally receive definitive intervention/care. But while the dance is going on, the pain medication RX’s keep being written. Six to 12 months later, and 200-300 Vicodin, Percocets later, you have an employee who has been strung along by the health care insurance trying to find a cheap fix, and is now strung out on pain medication just to be comfortable.”

“The health care benefits for tier-two workers are already substantially different from tier one,” a Jeep worker in Toledo told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “Why would we want to give the union control of our health care when they have their flower fund and other corrupt schemes?”

The contract fight between rank-and-file autoworkers and the conspiracy of the auto executives and the UAW is shaping up to be a major confrontation that will have vast consequences for the entire working class. That is why workers must take the conduct of the fight into their own hands through the formation of a network of rank-and-file factory committees, which will outline a list of non-negotiable demands and prepare for a national strike.

These demands should include a 40 percent wage increase, the abolition of tiers, the restoration of the eight-hour day, a halt to all plant closings and rehiring of all laid off and victimized workers and workers’ control over line speed and workplace safety.

At the same time, the demand must be raised: “No backroom conspiracies.” All negotiation sessions must be live-streamed; and in every plant rank-and-file committees should elect trusted workers to monitor all negotiations to break the union-company wall of silence.



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