

“We are ready to stay out as long as it takes”

Workers at GM, Ford, and Chrysler ready to strike in contract fight

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Autoworkers across the US are voting to authorize a strike action when the current four-year labor agreements covering 155,000 General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers in the US expires a little over three weeks from now, at midnight on September 14. Fiat Chrysler workers at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) in suburban Detroit and the Jeep assembly plant in Belvidere, Illinois were among the first to vote Thursday, with voting continuing next week and the tallies expected by August 29.

At the factory gates Thursday afternoon, Fiat Chrysler workers were anxious to talk to reporters from the World Socialist Web Site *Autoworker Newsletter* about the issues they want addressed in the new contracts. Many spoke of eliminating the hated two-tier wage system, which starts newly-hired full-time workers at half the pay of so-called legacy workers, i.e. those hired before 2007. These second-tier or so-called in-progression workers must work eight years to reach top pay and wait years before receiving basic medical coverage like dental and optical insurance.

“We got to get rid of the tiers,” was a common refrain. Others said, “We need more money,” and denounced claims by the auto companies that they could not afford raises when they were making record profits and paying their CEOs millions. “We need to get everything we gave up back and then some,” said a worker as she walked into the plant.

Many workers said they were ready to strike if the auto companies attempted to impose higher out-of-pocket health care expenses on them or cut their benefits by putting them under a plan run by the United Auto Workers union. The conspiracy by the auto companies and the union to expand the United Auto Workers Retiree Medical Benefits Trust to cover current employees, was a major factor in the 2-to-1 defeat of the UAW-FCA contract in 2015.

“We are ready to strike and to stay out as long as it takes,” said a worker with eight years at the FCA Warren Truck Plant, just north of Detroit. “I had to come back to work because the co-pays for my husband’s medical plan are horrible. He’s a retired Chrysler worker and my insurance is better than his.”

A number of Warren Truck workers with over 20 years

seniority said the thousands of temporary part-time workers hired by the company since the last contract in 2015 needed to get all the benefits the full-time workers have, including profit-sharing, health care, and job protections, and be converted to full-timers.

There is widespread disgust with the UAW and no confidence in its ability to represent autoworkers. A significant number of the UAW officials on the union bargaining committee who “negotiated” the sellout agreement in 2015 have been convicted or implicated in the multi-million-dollar bribery scandal. This includes four leaders of the UAW-FCA negotiations, including UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who took bribes to sign the pro-company deal.

The indictments have now spread to the UAW-GM bargaining committee in 2015, including Michael Grimes, who federal prosecutors say took \$1.99 million in kickbacks from vendors contracted by the UAW-GM Center for Human Resources. UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada, who led the GM talks in 2015 and is now leading the FCA negotiations is currently under investigation.

The corruption scandal that has engulfed the UAW flows out of the entire pro-corporate and nationalist orientation of the UAW, which has for decades sought to impose concessions on workers in the name of defending “American jobs.”

Expressing the fear that the UAW will not be able to contain another rebellion by rank-and-file workers, industry publication *Wards Auto* wrote Wednesday, “The scandal is placing substantial pressure on the UAW’s leadership, undermining both its authority and credibility at a critical time when it must decide what contract terms to accept and then sell them to a skeptical membership.”

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* has called for autoworkers to throw out the UAW bargaining committees and elect a bargaining committee made up of trusted rank-and-file workers from every factory. In order to prevent backroom deals, all talks should be live-streamed.

The break with the UAW must be part of a fight to build a network of rank-and-file committees in every factory, to mobilize the strength of workers to fight for independent

demands throughout the country and in solidarity with their class brothers and sisters all over the world.

Workers should call in-person and online meetings to formulate their own set of demands, based on what workers and their families need, not what the corporations and the UAW say is affordable. These should include:

- Stop all plant closings and layoffs, reopen Lordstown, Ohio and other shuttered plants, and rehire all laid-off and victimized workers.
- Eliminate the tier system, with all workers immediately brought up to top pay.
- Convert all temporary and part-time workers to fulltime, with no loss of seniority.
- A 40 percent wage increase and restoration of COLA! Restore overtime pay for work after eight hours and weekends! Increase company paid pensions and health care benefits for retirees.
- Abolish labor-management committees! For real industrial democracy and workers' control over production, line speed and safety.

Autoworkers must prevent the UAW from dragging the contracts past the September 14 deadline or from calling a bogus "Hollywood strike" designed to have the least impact on the corporations and pave the way for another sellout.

Instead workers must uphold the principle "No contract, no work!" and prepare a national strike by GM, Ford and FCA workers to shut down the entire auto and auto parts industry. This should include spreading the strike to the non-union transplants in the southern US states and appealing to workers in Mexico, Canada and internationally for cross-border actions.

A Warren Truck worker mocked the UAW, saying sarcastically, "Of course, the corruption had no effect on the contract. The UAW has been jerking us around for years. The whole lot of the bargaining committee should be thrown out. I agree with you, rank-and-file workers should form our own bargaining committee."

"We should have workers oversee the negotiations," another worker said. "We have no say-so over anything with the UAW. Anytime we challenge something the company is doing the union says, 'You voted for it.' But we never see the fine print in the contracts they sign.

"Safety is the most important issue," another worker said. "We have injuries and excessive working conditions. It's loud and we breathe bad air. OSHA is not forcing the company to adhere to safety standards and the union is always modifying the contract to let the company get away with anything. Instead of protecting us, the UAW is on the company's side."

Karen, a veteran SHAP worker, said, "It is all hush-hush with the UAW. They don't tell us anything." She agreed with replacing the UAW bargaining committee with a workers committee. "It has to come from us, the workers. The UAW isn't fighting for us, they are working for the company. Workers are talking though, and we know what it's really

going on here."

Another worker said, "Union officials hear that federal investigators are looking into them and they suddenly retire and collect a pension. How can we be paying for that? That's my demand: no pensions for the people who stole from us."

Last month, the *Wall Street Journal* warned that the "One big wild card in this round of talks" was the fact that nearly 42% of the Detroit Three's unionized workforce has never experienced a slowdown in the U.S. car sector ... Negotiators for the companies worry that this group of workers will pose a tougher challenge in terms of predictability because they have less exposure to economic hard times."

With the collusion of the UAW between 2007 and 2015, all-in labor costs for FCA fell from \$76 to \$47 an hour, \$73 to \$55 for GM, and \$70 down to \$57 for Ford. Second-tier, temporary and contract workers, some making as little as \$13 an hour, are producing one Jeep Cherokee every 47 seconds and \$10,000 per minute at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit. So-called legacy workers, making over \$30 an hour, have seen their own wages stagnate along with a concerted effort by both the companies and the UAW to drive them out and replace them with low-paid workers.

"We want an end to the tiers and equal pay for equal work," another Warren Truck worker said. "Over the last 16 years we have lost something in all four of the contracts. Now GM wants to follow Chrysler's lead and get more temps and contract workers. These young workers are building high-end vehicles and they can't even afford a used car. The TPTs pay union dues and the UAW does nothing to defend them. It's taxation without representation."

Dan, a SHAP worker who is getting ready to retire, said, "For the last 25 years I have voted to strike every time and against every contract. Things have only gotten worse and worse, and we are supposed to believe the union is working for us? No, they are not fighting for us. They just ask us year after year to give and give and all they do is take and take."

Dan explained that among his most important demand is abolishing the tier system, even though he is in the highest tier: "I am mostly worried about the new younger workers. A job here used to mean decent pay, enough to live. Now you can hardly get by. The tier system divides workers, plain and simple. I hope the younger workers fight back. I would support them."

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter urges workers to join an on-line meeting to discuss a fighting program for autoworkers on August 29 at 7:30 pm EDT. Sign up here!



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