Day after FBI raids of UAW, autoworkers cast near unanimous vote to strike

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Thousands of autoworkers completed voting Thursday to authorize strike action when the contracts for 155,000 General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers expire on September 14.

While the full tally has not yet been released by the United Auto Workers, workers across the US, including in the largest factories, cast near unanimous votes to walkout in order to fight for substantial improvements in wages and working conditions.

The solid support for a strike is a sign of the growing militancy of workers in the US and internationally. Anger is reaching a boiling point against the corporations and the UAW, which is a bribed tool of corporate management.

On Wednesday, the homes of the current and former presidents of the UAW were raided by the FBI in connection with the corruption probe into illegal bribe taking and kickbacks, which top officials received in exchange for signing pro-company contracts in 2015 and before.

Autoworkers at the largest factories voted by some of the highest margins. This included a 99 percent strike vote by workers at Ford's factories in Louisville, Kentucky, which employ 12,000 workers. The votes to strike at other large Ford plants include the truck assembly plant in Dearborn, Michigan (99 percent), Kansas City Assembly (98 percent), Chicago Assembly (94 percent) and the transmission plant in Sharonville, Ohio (99 percent).

General Motors workers also gave full backing for strike action. This included Flint Assembly (97 percent), Wentzville, Missouri Assembly (98 percent), Michigan assembly plants in Lansing (98 percent) and nearby Lansing Delta Township (98 percent) and Spring Hill, Tennessee (99 percent).

The same is true for Fiat Chrysler. Out of the 1,850 workers who cast ballots at the Toledo, Ohio Jeep plant, only 15 voted "no," with 98 percent voting "yes." 97 percent voted to strike at transmission plants in Kokomo, Indiana.

Votes for strike action were also high at Detroit-area FCA plants, including Sterling Heights Assembly (96 percent) and Jefferson North (95 percent), which have large numbers of younger and lower-paid second-tier and temporary part-time workers.

Workers who spoke to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* expressed their determination to fight. Nicole, a worker with 20 years at Ford's Flat Rock Assembly Plant, said, "It's nearly two weeks to the contract deadline, and the UAW is not telling us anything. What's going on? The union president's house was just raided.

"The UAW does nothing but divide us, turning second-tier workers against legacy workers like myself. Flat Rock used to be owned by Mazda, and there are a lot of original workers. But half the workforce are lower paid workers getting the short end of the stick. They are hardworking, but they are angry at us for making more money. I understand that. I was a temp for three years at the original Mustang plant in Dearborn and a single mother. The union has us pitted against each other, but we have to join together to fight."

Renee, a Dearborn Assembly Plant worker, said, "We have to show the temps and the second-tier workers that we don't agree with the way they are treated. We have to fight together; the most important thing is that they have a chance to be like us."

A Chicago Ford worker added, "We are going to have to form a pipeline for rank-and-file workers to communicate so we can gather together in groups and be prepared to fight a long battle.

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"The union and the company tried to segregate the older and young workers, so we don't take them under our wing. They should make the same pay that we make. We started at $12, but we got up to top dollar sooner, not the eight years the contract has now.

"Young and old workers have to come together to defeat the corruption. Their plan is to terminate workers with pensions or force us to retire. They want nothing but low paid workers. The union works against unity, but I've always voted for equality. If we are not getting any information, it is out of design. The union and the companies are afraid of us getting informed and coming together. We have to spread the work and get together."

The intervention of the Trump administration's Justice Department into the UAW is not aimed at rooting out corruption and strengthening workers. The investigation into the UAW, which began under Obama, started shortly after Fiat Chrysler workers revolted and defeated the 2015 contract by a 2-1 margin, the first defeat of a UAW-backed national contract in three decades.

Both the Democrats and Republicans fear that the UAW will not be able to contain the opposition of autoworkers, and that a strike could become a catalyst for a much broader movement of the working class against social inequality.

There is widespread speculation in the media that the corruption probe could lead to putting the UAW under government receivership—like the Bush administration did to the Teamsters in the late 1980s. This could mean suspending the right to strike and imposing mandatory arbitration in order to impose management's dictates.

At the same time, industry analysts worry that the further discrediting of the UAW can open the way for autoworkers to press for their demands.

"This round of contract negotiations was always going to be very difficult, even without the shadow of a federal investigation hanging over the union," said Kristin Dziczek, vice president of the corporate-aligned Center for Automotive Research (CAR) in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

"That shadow has just become a giant storm cloud," she said, warning "That could make it very difficult to ratify a new contract."

Autoworkers must take the conduct of the negotiations and the contract fight out of the hands of the corrupt UAW by forming rank-and-file factory committees. The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* proposes that autoworkers convene meetings in the factories, neighborhoods and online to formulate a series of demands, including a 40 percent raise, abolition of the tier system and the rehiring of all laid off and victimized workers.

The corrupt bargaining committee should be removed, and a rank-and-file bargaining committee elected made up of the most militant and trusted workers in every factory, committed to fighting for these non-negotiable demands.

At the same time, workers must prepare now for a strike by GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers when the contracts expires, and to spread the strike to union and non-union workers in the auto parts industry and the transplants in the South, while appealing for support from workers in Mexico, Canada and around the world for a joint struggle against the global automakers.

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