

After 96 percent strike vote, UAW picks GM workers to try to push through first concessions contract

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It is less than two weeks before the September 14 contract expiration for more than 155,000 US workers at General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler. Autoworkers have registered their determination to fight for substantial improvements in wages and conditions with a nearly unanimous strike authorization vote.

According to totals released by the United Auto Workers Tuesday, GM workers voted by 96.4 percent, Ford workers by 95.98 percent and FCA workers by 96 percent to walk out when their contracts expire.

Workers at all the automakers' more than 80 manufacturing facilities gave an overwhelming mandate for the first national strike since the Ford walkout in 1976. This included a 96 percent vote at GM's Detroit-Hamtramck plant, which GM has threatened to close in January.

Like other sections of workers in the US and internationally, autoworkers have suffered a decline in real wages over the last decade even as the transnational automakers have enjoyed a record profit boom. The militancy of autoworkers has been heightened by revelations that top officials in the UAW were paid millions in bribes to sign pro-company agreements.

Just after the release of the vote totals, UAW President Gary Jones—whose Detroit area home was raided by the FBI last week—announced that the GM would be the union's "target" for a deal that would set the pattern for Ford and Fiat Chrysler.

Up until the mid-1970s, being designated as the lead company in UAW negotiations generated anxiety in corporate boardrooms over a potentially crippling strike and a deal that would significantly raise labor costs. That dynamic, however, has been turned into its opposite. The companies virtually fall over each other to be the UAW's "strike target," knowing full well that the first company will get a deal from the UAW most closely tailored to its profit needs.

This is the third time in the last four contract cycles (2007,

2011 and 2019) that GM has been chosen. In each contract, the UAW has colluded with the auto bosses to roll back workers' wages and conditions.

In 2007, the UAW called a bogus two-day strike at GM and a six-hour strike at Chrysler, dubbed "Hollywood strikes" by workers because they were merely for show. Afterwards, the UAW signed a "transformational agreement" that introduced two-tier wages and paved the way for the elimination of tens of thousands of higher-paid "legacy workers."

Two years later, in 2009, the UAW collaborated with the Obama administration to reopen labor agreements during the government restructuring of GM and Chrysler and ram through sweeping concessions. The wages of all new hires were cut in half and the eight-hour day was abolished. The UAW accepted a six-year ban on strikes and the destruction of thousands of jobs. In exchange, it was handed control of the multi-billion-dollar retiree health care trust, largely funded with corporate stock.

In 2011, the UAW signed a deal with GM that expanded the number of second-tier workers and provided no wage or pension increases to workers who had suffered a pay freeze since 2003.

The 2011 UAW-GM bargaining committee included Dennis Williams, Joe Ashton, Michael Grimes and Jeff Pietrzyk, all of whom have either been indicted or implicated in an illegal multi-million-dollar kickback scheme involving the UAW-GM Center for Human Resources.

In 2015, the UAW chose Fiat Chrysler, the weakest financially of the Big Three, as the lead company. However, FCA workers revolted and defeated the contract, by a 2-to-1 margin. This was the first UAW-backed national agreement rejected by workers in three decades.

The UAW responded by launching a campaign of intimidation and fraud to get a second FCA deal passed, along with similar contracts at Ford and GM. The contracts

limited labor cost increases to below the rate of inflation, imposed an eight-year “grow-in period” for new hires to reach top wages and medical benefits, sharply increased the number of temporary part-time workers and facilitated the closing of factories.

Six of the top eight UAW-Chrysler negotiators, including UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, have since been indicted or implicated for taking illegal bribes.

The GM deal was pushed through by UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada who ignored the “no” vote by skilled workers and ratified it anyway. Estrada, who is also being investigated in the UAW corruption case, is now head negotiator for the UAW-FCA department.

Last November, GM announced that it would not allocate new products to five North American plants and would lay off 14,000 production and white-collar workers. The UAW and its Canadian counterpart, Unifor, responded with a filthy anti-Mexican campaign aimed at diverting anger from the corporations and the unions, which have claimed for decades that endless concessions from workers would “save” their jobs.

Three of the factories—the historic Lordstown, Ohio assembly plant and two transmission plants in Baltimore and the Detroit suburb of Warren—have already been closed. In May, Unifor cut a deal to keep a few hundred of the 2,900 workers employed at the Oshawa, Ontario assembly plant where 20,000 GM workers were once employed.

The remaining factory—the Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant, GM’s only factory inside the former Motor City—is scheduled to close in January. There is little doubt that the UAW and GM will use the plant and other factories working below full capacity as a carrot in a bogus “plant-saving” deal attached to even deeper concessions.

In a November 29, 2018 article, the industry publication *Automotive News* laid out this exact scenario. After complaining that “many UAW members want more: more raises, more profit-sharing, more everything,” reporter Michael Wayland wrote that the plant closing announcement would change “the narrative from members wanting more to potentially just wanting to save jobs and plants.”

The closings, Wayland says, could also “be a blessing in disguise for UAW leaders, who are fighting an internal battle with members following a federal corruption scandal. If union leaders can save one, maybe two plants, they could be seen as heroes instead of company pawns...”

Any deal to keep a factory open, however, would come at a huge cost to workers, he wrote, adding, “Expect GM to demand untraditional employment practices such as an increase in temporary, subcontracted or outsourced workers.”

GM officials complain that they have the highest all-in

labor costs of the three Detroit-based automakers. While it currently has about 4,650 temporary workers, or 10 percent of the 46,000 workers in its US hourly work force, it wants far more.

According to industry web site, *The Detroit Bureau*, Chuck Stevens, GM’s former chief financial officer, who retired last year, “told analysts two years ago that the company wanted to have 50% of the work in GM’s factories done by temporary labor.” This would allow GM to sharply reduce labor costs and quickly close more plants as sales fall in the event of a widely expected global economic downturn.

The current “negotiations” are not between two adversarial parties, but a joint conspiracy by the UAW and the auto companies to further impoverish autoworkers.

To defeat this conspiracy, autoworkers have to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file factory committees to prepare a national strike to overturn all of the concessions handed over by the UAW.

The corrupt bargaining committee should be thrown out and replaced by a committee of the most militant and trusted workers committed to fight for the demands of workers, including abolishing the two-tier system, converting all temporary and contract workers to full-time employees, the rehiring of all laid off workers and a 40 percent wage increase.

Workers must uphold the principle of “No contract, no work,” and prepare a national strike to shut down the auto and auto parts industry, including calling out all workers, unionized and non-union. Appeals must be made now to workers in Mexico, Canada and throughout the world to carry out a globally coordinated struggle against the worldwide assault on jobs and conditions.

This must be combined with a rejection of all forms of nationalism promoted by the unions, the Trump administration and the Democrats, and the fight for the transformation of the global auto industry into a public enterprise, organized on the socialist principle of production for human need, not private profit.

We urge autoworkers and other workers to join the online meeting this Thursday, September 5 at 7:30 p.m. EDT to discuss a strategy to take forward this fight. To register, go to wsws.org/autocall.



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