

Unifor tries to keep Canadian autoworkers in the dark about US contract battle

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At Unifor's recent national convention in Quebec City, the nationalist-corporatist perspective of Canada's largest private sector union was once again on full display. At a time when 150,000 US autoworkers at the Detroit Three car companies are engaged in a bitter contract fight and preparing for strike action, Unifor President Jerry Dias and the rest of the union top brass made not a single mention of the looming confrontation south of the border.

There is no innocent explanation for this. Dias and everyone else know full well that the terms negotiated at the Detroit Three's American operations will serve as the benchmark for the contracts at their facilities in Canada, when they come up for renewal in 2020. If the automakers and the corrupt United Auto Workers (UAW), which has assisted the auto bosses in imposing wage and job cuts for decades, get their way, this benchmark will mean further devastating concessions for autoworkers and their families.

The silence of Dias and Unifor as a whole is not hard to fathom. The US Detroit Three workers have already voted by well over 90 percent in favour of strike action when their contracts expire just before midnight Sept. 14. The Unifor bureaucrats are terrified that the impending struggle of workers south of the border could trigger a cross-border counteroffensive, uniting Canadian and US autoworkers in a joint struggle to take back the decades of concessions rammed down their throats by the UAW and Unifor alike.

While Dias found no time to utter a single syllable about the US autoworkers' contract struggle, he ensured that much of Unifor's national convention was given over to campaigning for the reelection of Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government. Both Trudeau and Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland were given the platform to deliver lengthy speeches, in which they praised the Liberals' "special partnership" with the unions.

Dias reciprocated with fulsome praise for Trudeau and former Ontario Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne, lauding their governments for producing "advances" for working people.

In reality, the unions' partnership with the Liberals—a

partnership in which Dias and Unifor have been in the forefront—has been aimed at suppressing the class struggle and otherwise advancing the agenda of corporate Canada. Dias served as a close adviser to the Trudeau government during the NAFTA renegotiation and hailed the outcome of the talks, that is, a more explicit trade-war bloc of North America's imperialist powers, and Canada's deeper integration into Washington's incendiary military-strategic offensive against China.

Unifor's promotion of economic nationalism in the NAFTA talks went hand-in-hand with its derailing of opposition to GM's closure of its Oshawa assembly plant. The union smothered all job action and, in the name of defending "Canadian jobs," pitted autoworkers against each other. It appealed to GM to keep the Oshawa plant open at the expense of the US workers whose jobs were also being cut, and mounted a diversionary and racist anti-Mexican boycott campaign.

As for Wynne, Unifor, joined by Ontario's other unions, assisted her as she imposed sweeping social spending cuts and privatizations and criminalized worker job action.

The convention starkly revealed whose side Unifor is really on. It was held as autoworkers across Canada followed with enthusiasm reports of the determination of their class brothers and sisters to fight for jobs and better working conditions.

The well-heeled Unifor and UAW bureaucrats have a common interest in suppressing the resistance of Canadian and US autoworkers and keeping them disunited. For decades, the UAW, and Unifor's predecessor the Canadian Auto Workers, which carried out a nationalist split from the UAW in 1985, have pitted Canadian and the US autoworkers against each other. Both unions have imposed round after round of "whipsawed" wage, job and benefit cuts in the name of defending "American" or "Canadian" jobs.

This strategy has failed to save a single job, either in Canada or the US. Instead, it has played directly into the hands of the auto bosses, who took advantage of the

globalization of production to shift factories to the location with the lowest-bidder in terms of labour costs.

In one section of his speech, Dias discussed the imminent end of auto assembly at GM's Oshawa plant. He tried to pass this off as "bittersweet," because the company, in exchange for the union imposing the closure, has said it will keep on a few hundred workers making car parts. About the more than 10,000 US autoworkers whose jobs are also being eliminated as part of the same GM "restructuring" program, Dias breathed not a word.

However, the Unifor president did find time in his address to crow over the recent GM announcement that it will lay off the third shift at its San Luis Potosi, Mexico, plant that assembles the Equinox, while "only" imposing several temporary shutdowns of Equinox production at its Ingersoll, Ontario, CAMI facility.

Dias and the other speakers at the Unifor convention studiously avoided making any reference to the ever-expanding UAW corruption scandal. A host of senior UAW officials, including current President Gary Jones and his immediate predecessor, Dennis Williams, have been targeted by FBI raids on the basis of allegations that they accepted millions in bribes from Big Three executives, and several top-tier UAW officials have already been convicted.

Canadian autoworkers have rightly pointed out to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that the very fact that the rotten and bribery tainted 2015 contracts the UAW imposed on US Detroit Three workers became the framework for those reached in Canada a year later casts a foul smell over the entire 2016 Canadian negotiations.

In 2018, Al Iacobelli, a former Fiat Chrysler Vice President with major input in negotiating what was the 2015 US auto "pattern" agreement, was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in a US prison for tax evasion and his role in greasing the palms of UAW officials.

This same Iacobelli was also one of GM Canada's principal negotiators in the 2016 bargaining round with Unifor, which ended with agreements that further enshrined two-tier wages and slashed pensions. GM was selected by Unifor President Jerry Dias to set the "pattern" for its contracts with the Detroit Three's Canadian subsidiaries.

Asked by the *Detroit Free Press* about the corruption scandal shortly after Iacobelli was indicted, Dias praised this ruthless representative of the bosses as a "professional labour executive." "I've probably known Al for 15 years," said Dias. "This is right out of left field. I never would have expected it. I'm in shock to say the least."

When the corruption scandal broke, Dias was adamant that the "integrity" of the concessions contracts that were negotiated in 2015 by UAW officials who were pocketing company bribes should not be called into question. As the

scandal has spread to engulf the top leadership of the UAW, exposing it as a veritable criminal organization, he and the Unifor have fallen deafeningly silent.

The transnational corporations have a global strategy to pit workers against each other and shift production to the lowest cost areas. This strategy is facilitated by their bought-and-paid-for servants in the UAW and Unifor, who consciously divide workers along national lines and suppress any attempt to resist the corporations' concessions demands. If Unifor gets its way, Canadian autoworkers will sit quietly on the sidelines while the UAW-Detroit Three "partnership" rams yet another round of givebacks down the throats of their US brothers and sisters. Then, when negotiations begin in Canada a little under twelve months from now, Dias' line will be that concessions are necessary in order to stay "competitive" and defend "Canadian jobs."

Canadian autoworkers, including those in the auto parts sector, should oppose and actively resist this conspiracy. They should seize the initiative by establishing rank-and-file committees in the plants to take control of their struggle out of the hands of the corrupt Unifor bureaucrats. These committees should immediately declare their support for a common fight with autoworkers in the United States, Mexico, and internationally in order to overturn the decades of concessions and secure decent-paying, permanent jobs for all.

To discuss how to prosecute such a struggle, the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* strongly urges autoworkers in Canada to participate in our next online forum on Thursday, September 5, at 7:30 p.m. EDT. Register today to join the discussion.



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