

Updated 5:35 PM EDT

Faced with massive opposition among workers, UAW calls national strike at GM

WSWS Autoworker Newsletter
15 September 2019

BREAKING NEWS: GM publishes offer details

General Motors released details of its proposal to UAW negotiators, in a highly unusual statement posted Sunday afternoon.

While the supposed highlights are vague and self-serving, reading between the lines reveals the strategy for concessions which GM has been cooking up with its lackeys on the UAW “bargaining” committee.

GM claims that their proposal would have meant \$7 billion in new US investments and 5,400 new jobs. This, however, is a drop in the bucket when compared to the jobs bloodbath in the auto industry over the last 12 months. Since January alone the US industry has laid off more than 20,000 autoworkers; in China and India automakers have laid off over 200,000 and 350,000 this year, respectively.

GM took the lead with its announcement last year that it would close five North American plants and lay off 14,000 employees worldwide. As the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* warned, one of the functions of the announcement was to lay the foundation for a rotten deal combining major concessions with a face-saving agreement to “save” one or two facilities.

These warnings have now been effectively confirmed. According to press sources, the deal would have involved a plan to eventually re-open Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly, slated for closure in January, as a facility building next-generation electric pickup trucks. However, the plant would still be idled next year, with only vague promises to re-open it at some point during the four-year agreement.

Electric vehicles require less labor to build because they use far fewer parts than traditional gas-powered vehicles, meaning that a large portion of the jobs lost at the plant would never be restored.

The statement also declares that the proposal would have created a new battery plant in the vicinity of Lordstown Assembly, which was shuttered earlier this year. However, Lordstown itself still would be sold off under the plan to an electric vehicle start-up company.

GM says nothing specific about wages and benefits, a clear sign that it expects to slash labor costs. Prior to the start of talks, GM complained that it spends far more in all-in hourly labor costs than its foreign competitors at plants in the southern US.

In particular, GM pointed to the fact that only 6 percent of its work is performed by temp labor, compared to 20 percent at foreign automakers’ US-based facilities. A former GM executive told Wall Street investors two years ago that the company wanted half of its labor force to consist of temps.

Significantly, the press release says nothing at all about the use of temporary part-time (TPT) labor, a guilty silence that indicates that the deal provided for massive increases.

Particularly absurd is the claim that the deal would “retain nationally-

leading health care benefits” for autoworkers. Given the fact many news sources have pointed out that autoworkers pay much less in out-of-pocket health care expenses than the national average, this carefully-worded statement is not mutually exclusive of major cuts. The auto companies have pointed to health care as a major area where they are seeking to cut costs.

Faced with massive opposition among workers, UAW calls national strike at GM

The United Auto Workers announced a nationwide strike at General Motors at a press conference in downtown Detroit. The strike will officially begin at midnight tonight.

If the strike goes ahead, it could become the first major nationwide strike at a US-based auto maker since 1976.

The announcement followed a meeting of the UAW GM-National Council. Earlier on Sunday, Flint autoworkers denounced the union for ordering them to cross the picket lines of UAW janitors employed by Aramark who were called out by the union after midnight Saturday.

The UAW ordered autoworkers to continue working past the contract expiration last night in order to buy time. However, in the face of boiling anger among workers over company demands for more concessions and mounting exposures of union corruption the officials concluded they had no alternative to calling a nationwide strike.

Significantly, UAW President Gary Jones, who was identified last week as a participant in the theft of millions of dollars in union funds for lavish golf outings, stays at Palms Springs villas a other personal indulgences was nowhere to be seen at the press conference.

The strike will be a powerful expression of the resurgence of the class struggle in the US and internationally and an indication of the immense power of the working class. However, workers must be forewarned that the UAW will seek to shut it down at the earliest opportunity and ram through concessions. They should draw lessons from previous strikes, including the strike at GM in 2007. The “Hollywood” strike lasted only two days before the UAW rammed through a deal that introduced the hated the two-tier wages structure.

This underscores the urgency of autoworkers taking the conduct of the contract struggle out of the hands of the UAW by organizing rank-and-file factory committees and preparing a fight to mobilize all 158,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers. The UAW and the corporations must not be allowed once again to defy the will of the workers and push through a contract that will have devastating consequences for autoworkers, their

families and future generations of workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* will provide further updates as this story develops.

Autoworkers furious as UAW orders them to cross janitors' picket lines

In a flagrant betrayal, the United Auto Workers union ordered production workers at General Motors to cross the picket lines of UAW janitorial contractors, whom the union called out on strike at five plants after midnight Saturday.

The UAW is keeping autoworkers on the job in spite of the fact that the contract for 46,000 GM workers was allowed to expire at midnight, and even though GM is pressing ahead with demands to gut healthcare benefits, close plants and increase the number of poverty-wage temporary and contract workers.

The five plants involved in the janitors' strike are: Flint Metal Center, Flint Engine Operations, Flint Assembly and Warren Tech Center, all in Michigan, and the Parma Metal Center near Cleveland, Ohio. The janitors, who work for GM contractor Aramark, are also members of the UAW.

The early morning scenes of workers in Flint, birthplace of the UAW and the site of the historic sit-down strike of 1936-37, being ordered by the union to cross the picket lines of workers at the same plants sum up the transformation of the UAW into a bribed arm of management. The sit-down strike demonstrated the immense industrial and social power of the working class when it fights in unity and solidarity. That legacy is precisely what the UAW long ago repudiated and has sought to destroy.

This betrayal could be followed later on Sunday by the union instructing the autoworkers at just these five plants to stop working and honor the janitors' picket lines as a means of avoiding a direct strike against GM and attempting to divide, disorient and demoralize the workers, who want an all-out united struggle against the auto companies. Such a sordid maneuver would leave most of GM's facilities fully operational, including 11 of 12 US-based assembly plants.

Autoworkers who spoke to the press were furious that the UAW is forcing them to scab on the janitors. One Flint worker was on the verge of tears going to work, according to the Detroit *Free Press*.

"They've segregated us away from GM," one of the janitors told the newspaper. "We're one union. Everything should be done together. We're supposed to be brothers and sisters."

Even as autoworkers at the five plants were being forced by the union to scab, the UAW-GM Council was holding a private meeting at 10 a.m. at the Marriott Renaissance Hotel (located in the GM-owned Renaissance Center), to be followed by a press conference. The body, which is made up of local union officers from GM plants across the country, will decide what action to take. Far removed from the sentiments of workers on the shop floor, the UAW tops on the International Executive Board hope they can get a sounding on the situation from the local union bureaucrats, while giving them their marching orders to keep the lid on opposition.

A reporting team for the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* was barred by UAW officials from entering the premises to cover the meeting. When *Autoworker Newsletter* and *WSWS Labor Editor* Jerry White objected to this flagrant attack on freedom of the press and pointed out that the *Wall Street Journal* was allowed into the press conference, a UAW official retorted, "Freedom means that I do not have to answer any of your questions."

Whatever happens, the UAW has already set the tone by scabbing on its own membership. Its aim is to divide the autoworkers and break up the momentum for mass action.

This betrayal by the UAW flies in the face of the 96 percent strike mandate by GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler (FCA) workers. The failure to this point to call even a token strike of GM workers is an indication of how fearful the UAW is that it could quickly lose control of even a limited action and unleash the strength of the working class. The UAW wants to announce a settlement while workers are still in the factories out of concern that once workers walk out, it will not be able to get them back to work.

The union fears that a strike—especially one that forces the company to retreat—will encourage workers' militancy and undermine its corporatist policy. Along with his henchmen, UAW President Gary Jones, who is facing a looming criminal indictment on corruption charges, believes that the union officials must prove their continued usefulness to the government and the corporations if they are to plea bargain successfully.

On Saturday evening, UAW Vice President Terry Dittes sent a letter to GM local union presidents, shop chairmen, finance and other local officers announcing that the UAW would continue negotiations to reach an agreement by the deadline and that "no decisions or actions will be taken until the IEB [International Executive Board] meets at midnight and the National Council convenes at 10 am on Sunday."

In comments directed to rank-and-file workers livid over being kept in the dark for weeks about the status of the negotiations, or even what demands the UAW is putting forward, Dittes said that "some progress had been made." He went on to say, however, that "significant differences between the parties remain on wages, healthcare benefits, temporary employees, job security and profit sharing."

The fact is that the UAW and the corporations reached an agreement long ago and the "negotiations" are nothing more than strategy sessions to decide the best way to ram the deal through in the face of mass opposition among the workers. Even if one were to take Dittes' comments at face value, it means the UAW is forcing workers to remain on the job under conditions where GM has not moved an iota from its demands.

The UAW International Executive Board, which is made up of President Gary Jones, Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry, vice presidents Terry Dittes (GM), Rory Gamble (Ford) and Cindy Estrada (FCA) and nine regional directors, met at midnight Saturday. The same body held a contentious meeting Friday where it demonstrated the union's contempt for workers by voting to keep Jones in power, even though he has now been implicated in a scheme in which UAW officials embezzled more than \$1 million in union money for golf outings, luxury villas, champagne and other luxuries.

The UAW may still feel it has to call a limited strike in order to let off steam and regain some measure of credibility among the workers. Such an action, however, would be designed to have as little impact as possible on the bottom line of the corporations, while creating better conditions to push through a pro-company deal. A three-day walkout at GM and six-hour strike at Chrysler in 2007 were followed by the introduction of the hated two-tier wage system.

Workers are determined to fight GM, which has made \$35 billion in profits in just the last three years, while spending more than \$10 billion on stock buybacks for its wealthy shareholders since 2015.

The same is true for Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers. On Friday, the UAW extended the contracts with the other automakers in order to divide autoworkers, even as the Big Three companies collaborate to impose further concessions. Union stewards and team leaders spread throughout the plants to tell workers they should not walk out tonight.

A Fiat Chrysler worker at the Sterling Heights Assembly plant (SHAP) told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, "A lot has been taken away from us. If we all got up, right now and walked out, the companies would lose millions in the first hour of the strike. The people of the United States should shut the whole country down. We're ready. Everybody together would be more powerful than the billionaires. Production is connected

worldwide, and we work on the same products as workers in Canada and Mexico. That makes it an international struggle.

“I worked the C Crew [swing shift] at SHAP for the last five years. People are so tired that there a lot of accidents with the C Crew workers trying to get home. You can talk to any doctor and they will tell you how bad that shift is for your health. I overheard top management saying that Chrysler will never give up the C Crew because it is too profitable.”

Like the other global automakers, GM has slashed tens of thousands of white-collar and production jobs at its operations around the world and is in the process of closing five plants in the US and Canada, including the iconic Lordstown, Ohio, assembly plant and its only assembly plant in Detroit.

The plant closings, which were announced late last year, are part of the joint strategy of GM and the UAW to use job threats to push through even deeper concessions. In the past, the UAW and the automakers have announced so-called “plant saving” deals that include “competitive wage structures” and other concessions, including manning the factories with mainly lower-paid second-tier workers, along with temporary and contract workers who must pay UAW dues but can be hired and fired at will.

Autoworkers have seen this game plan before and are determined to prevent it from happening again. They know that the entire “bargaining process” is a fraud because those who claim to be negotiating for them have been exposed as bribe-takers working for management.

To defeat this corporate-UAW conspiracy, workers must take the control of the negotiations and the contract fight out of the hands of the UAW by building rank-and-file factory committees. Workers should hold meetings in the factories and on social media to elect these committees, formulate their own demands, and prepare to intervene directly to countermand any decisions by the UAW that adversely affect workers and their families.

What is needed is a real fight to mobilize all 158,000 GM, Ford and FCA workers and far broader sections of the working class. This includes reaching out to GM and other autoworkers in Canada, Mexico, Korea and other countries and forging a joint struggle in defense of jobs and living standards.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact