

UAW keeping workers in the dark as it works to shut down strike against GM

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With the strike by 48,000 General Motors workers in the US entering its 11th day, the United Auto Workers is continuing to keep striking workers in the dark by refusing to reveal the content of its “negotiations” with GM.

The nationwide walkout is the longest in the auto industry since the 21-day Ford strike in 1976 and the 67-day walkout at GM in 1970. It is part of a global eruption of class struggle, including the resumption of strikes by autoworkers in Korea yesterday.

In perfunctory letter to GM workers released Tuesday, UAW Vice President Terry Dittes said, “All unsettled proposals are now at the Main Table and have been presented to General Motors, and we are awaiting their response. This back and forth will continue until negotiations are complete.”

The letter did not say what the content of the “back and forth” is. From the start of official “negotiations” in mid-July, the UAW has not revealed any of the details of its demands. That’s because they don’t have any. Like every other contract over the last 40 years, the terms have been set by corporate management, with discussion centered on how to force workers to accept a new round of concessions.

Dittes’ statement that the discussions are at the “main table” rather than sub-committees has led some news outlets, including CNBC, to claim that the parties are close to a tentative agreement to end the strike.

Dittes said the UAW International staff and bargaining committee have “been working countless hours to reach an agreement” and will “continue to bargain this contract until your Bargaining Committee is satisfied that we have achieved an Agreement that properly addresses our Members’ concerns.”

The “concerns” of autoworkers are recouping all the concessions the UAW has handed over, particularly

since the 2009 auto industry restructuring by the Obama administration. Workers want to abolish the two-tier wage and benefit system, roll over all temps to full-time positions, win substantial wage increases, restore lost benefits to retirees, and stop plant closings and layoffs.

But the UAW does not agree with any of that. It has colluded in expanding the number of temps and contract workers who earn as little as \$11 an hour. As for cutting health care costs, the UAW attempted to push through a Health Care Co-op in 2015 that would relieve the companies of their health care obligations and put the UAW in charge of cutting benefits. This failed only because Fiat Chrysler workers overwhelmingly rejected the contract that contained this provision.

The only information about the content of the issues has been released by GM. After more than a decade of frozen real wages, the company is offering annual raises or bonuses of two percent, even less than the three percent wage increase and a four percent lump sum in the 2015 contract. This would be more than chewed up by sharp increases in health care contributions, which could rise from 3 to 15 percent.

GM is refusing to shorten the eight-year “grow-in” period for lower-wage second-tier workers to reach top pay and wants a sharp expansion of temporary workers who can be hired and fired at will.

“This is all behind closed doors discussions,” a striking Detroit-Hamtramck worker complained. “It’s like inside the plant. You never hear from the UAW officials unless they want to get your vote. Otherwise you never see them.”

The worker, who has nearly 15 years at the plant, also said the UAW has also given GM the green light to employ contract workers at the plant who make as little

as \$11 an hour. “They are UAW Local 22 members like us, but they work under a separate contract and do all the material handling work that used to be done by workers making top wages. The union told them, ‘You work for \$11 an hour or you’re going to be on the streets.’”

“They put in the same kind of Competitive Operating Agreement at the Orion plant,” the worker said, referring to the assembly plant in the northern suburbs of Detroit. UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada signed the secret deal behind the backs of Orion workers that established a 60-40 split, with 60 percent of workers earning the top wage of around \$30 an hour, and 40 percent temps making less than half as much.

“Once one of the higher paid workers retired, a temp is supposed to be rolled over to full-time. But that hasn’t happened.”

GM has floated the idea of building electric batteries near the Lordstown, Ohio plant, which it has closed and plans to sell to an electric vehicle start up, which will employ a few hundred workers. It has also said it might bring in an electric pickup truck to the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, which is scheduled to close in January. In both cases, this would require the expansion of the number of low paid temps.

The UAW only called the strike because it realized it could not impose the company’s dictates without provoking an uprising by rank-and-file workers whose suspicions that the UAW was bribed have been confirmed in the federal corruption investigation.

UAW officials are now carrying out a waiting game, isolating the GM strikers by keeping Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers on the job. The UAW is seeking to starve workers into submission with poverty rations of \$250 a week in strike pay.

At the same time, UAW officials are debating whether they can get away with shutting down the strike as soon as they reach an agreement, or whether it is safer to get a ratification first through a reprise of the campaign of lies, intimidation and vote-rigging they used in 2015.

In an effort to boost their credibility, the UAW has brought in a parade of potential Democratic presidential candidates. But it was the Democratic Party, under the Obama administration, that expanded the two-tier system and imposed other concessions.

The strike is a “make or break” battle for autoworkers

and all workers, the GM worker said. “We have to stand up and make a change no matter how long we have to stay out. All the autoworkers, including Ford and Fiat Chrysler, should walk out together. We’re fighting giant corporations, which think they can just walk over us. The UAW is not going to fight for us. All they want is to be off the line and collecting their big paychecks.”

There is not a single legitimate reason why workers should be the last to know what is being discussed behind closed doors. The only explanation for the silence of the UAW is that it is conspiring to impose another pro-company contract. The company agents in Solidarity House know if workers have the truth they would rebel and spread the strike throughout the industry.

The UAW does not have a strategy to win the strike, it has a strategy to defeat it. To prevent this, workers must take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the UAW through the formation of rank-and-file factory committees. Workers must hold meetings outside the view of the UAW and management, elect representatives from the most militant and trusted workers, and assemble to formulate their own demands.

The strike must be immediately expanded to include Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers, and an appeal must be made for support from the entire working class. The struggle of autoworkers in the US must be connected to the struggle of workers in Canada, Mexico, Korea, India, Europe and throughout the world.

On September 26 at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter is hosting an online meeting to discuss the strategy and perspective needed to win the strike. To participate, visit wsws.org/autocall.



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