

Ford autoworkers denounce tentative deal as corruption scandal engulfs UAW leadership

Marcus Day
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Fifty-five thousand autoworkers at Ford Motor Co. in the US begin voting today on a four-year contract backed by the United Auto Workers union, with balloting scheduled to conclude on November 15.

The latest UAW sellout agreement was announced last Wednesday, only three days after bargaining over “major economic issues” supposedly began with Ford, and less than a week after the UAW shut down the 40-day strike by some 48,000 General Motors workers.

The UAW-Ford deal is “patterned” on the intensified conditions of exploitation accepted by the UAW in the GM contract. Like GM, which secured the closure of Lordstown Assembly and the expanded use of temporary workers, Ford would be able to save billions throughout the next four years by shutting its Romeo, Michigan engine plant, buying out better-paid “legacy” workers, and increasing its reliance on temporary workers.

Unlike the GM agreement, which limited offers of “special retirement packages” to 2,000 older, better-paid workers, the Ford contract would allow for the buyout of an unlimited number of “eligible production employees,” enabling the company to massively reduce its labor costs.

An unprecedented crisis is gripping the UAW as the vote at Ford begins. The corruption scandal that first emerged into the open in mid-2017 with revelations of bribery of UAW officials by Fiat Chrysler executives has now engulfed the highest echelons of the union apparatus.

On Saturday, UAW President Gary Jones announced that he was taking a leave of absence, following the indictment last week of Edward Robinson, a high-ranking official at the UAW Region 5 office, which Jones previously oversaw. Federal prosecutors charged Robinson with conspiring with six other top UAW officials to embezzle \$1.5 million in union funds between 2010 and 2019. The indictment states that Robinson split over \$700,000 in embezzled funds with “UAW Official A,” identified by the Detroit press as Gary Jones. According to court filings cited by the *Detroit Free Press*, more than \$32,000 in cash was seized by the FBI during a raid on Jones’ home in September.

Jones will continue to draw his \$260,243 salary during his leave, with UAW Vice President for Ford Rory Gamble serving as interim president.

Immense anger is building up among workers at Ford over the terms of the deal negotiated by the discredited and corrupt UAW apparatus. None of the aspirations of workers—for the conversion of all temps to full-time, an end to the wage and benefit tier system, and the abolition of the 10-hour-plus days of the “Alternative Work Schedule”—have been met.

“I think it’s trash. It’s a BS contract,” a worker at the Dearborn Truck Plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* over the weekend. “I’m going to vote no. I wish I could vote no on Gary Jones too.”

The worker supported an industrywide walkout but said he did not believe it would happen under the UAW. “We should strike all three companies together. With the UAW a national strike will never happen, especially with these crooks. All the UAW get kickbacks for everything.”

Terrence, a worker at Ford Chicago Stamping plant, said he opposed the agreement because it did not offer a guarantee of full-time positions to temporary workers.

“It’s all a game,” he said. “In this contract if you’re a temporary worker, they can lay you off for 31 days and then call you back, but you have to start your service all over again. That’s the part they don’t tell you about.”

Demetrius, a full-time worker at Ford Chicago Assembly, said there was widespread sentiment for a “no” vote at his plant. “Promises were made eight years ago that temporary workers would become full-time, and now they’re pushing it back again. It’s a lot of broken promises, and [the UAW] keeps repeating the same thing as they did in the last contracts.”

Over the weekend, the UAW released its 769-page contract “white book,” the pages supposedly changed from the previous contract. What is contained in the so-called white book—and what is omitted—make clear that the UAW is attempting to force through the demands of the company.

Ominously absent from the white book are letters of

understanding on the future of the Flat Rock Assembly, just south of Detroit, and the Buffalo Stamping Plant, which are referred to in the contract summary. The summary cites Admin. Letter 26U and Admin. Letter 16U on the “viability strategy” and “competitiveness” of Flat Rock and Buffalo, respectively.

The absence of the side agreements almost certainly means the UAW has agreed to some type of “competitive wage structure” at the Flat Rock and Buffalo plants like it did to supposedly “save” the Sterling Axle, Rawsonville and Woodhaven factories in Michigan in the 2015 contract. At these factories, wages top out at \$10 an hour below the pay of “legacy” workers at other factories and the UAW is committed to help Ford rid the workforce of all higher-paid veteran workers, either through transfers or forced retirements.

According to a *Bloomberg* report, Ford plans to shift production of a planned electric vehicle from Flat Rock to its Avon Lake, Ohio plant, placing a question mark over the future of the suburban Detroit plant.

Along with the bogus “pathway” to full-time employment for temps and innumerable exceptions to wage increases, Ford workers have taken to Facebook to denounce the inclusion of even-more punitive attendance policies. Workers would be allowed only seven unexcused absences (AWOLs) in the new agreement, down from nine in the previous contract, and would be prohibited from using paid “family days” after receiving five AWOLs.

The General Motors and Ford contracts are designed to allow the auto companies to maintain labor “flexibility” and shed thousands of workers and shutter plants when they deem it necessary.

A *Wall Street Journal* article published on Friday, “For GM, the Strike Was Worth It for the Long Run,” provides further confirmation that the companies are ruthlessly pursuing long-term structural changes at the expense of workers’ livelihoods. The article states that the company was determined to avoid returning to the “old days” of “gold-plated benefits” for workers, including income protection during layoffs, and “is pouring billions into electric cars and autonomous vehicles, and needs maximum flexibility to minimize the risk.”

With auto sales slumping worldwide and wages continuing to stagnate, all the automakers are seeking to shred whatever remains of job security and employment protection, hoping to transform their workforces into largely contingent “gig” economy workers. Gloating over the hollow nature of investment and product guarantees at the Lake Orion and Detroit-Hamtramck plants, where GM is currently producing or says it will produce electric vehicles in the future, the author concluded, “GM has shown willingness in recent

years to cut losses when projects go from dream to headache. The latest contract insures GM can quit banging its head against the wall anytime it wants.”

Ford and the other auto giants are being driven on by Wall Street to deepen the exploitation of workers in order to ensure the continued flow of billions to the financial elite. Since the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry, Ford has made over \$70 billion in profits, averaging over \$7 billion a year.

Ford has showered its large shareholders with money pumped out of workers, spending \$711 million in stock buybacks since 2015, including \$237 million in September 2019 alone. During this period, it also paid out over \$11 billion in dividends.

Workers should reject the UAW-Ford contract with the contempt it deserves. The ever-tightening corruption scandal around the UAW leadership demonstrates that the entire contract “negotiation” process has been illegitimate and fundamentally criminal.

But a “no” vote alone will not be sufficient to win workers’ demands, and it would be a fatal illusion to believe that the corporatist institution of the UAW can be reformed and compelled to fight for workers.

The urgent, unpostponable task is for workers to form new organizations in a rebellion against the UAW. Workers must take the initiative and form rank-and-file factory committees at every plant and workplace. Workers’ control must be asserted over the contract vote in order to prevent a repeat of the UAW’s 2015 ballot-stuffing at Ford, and preparations made for an all-out strike against the auto industry at Ford, GM and Fiat Chrysler. This should be part of an industrial and political counteroffensive to secure the social rights of the working class, which must be based on an international socialist strategy, including the transformation of the global auto industry and the giant banks into public enterprises collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class.



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