

Amidst growing opposition

UAW-Ford contract gives green light for video monitoring of workers

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As workers review the full text of the agreement between the United Auto Workers and Ford, opposition is mounting. Early vote results have already shown significant opposition to the sellout deal, with workers at Chicago Assembly voting 1,497 (62 percent) “no” against 913 “yes.”

The contract is tailored to the needs of Ford management, which is under enormous pressure from Wall Street to drive up the rate of exploitation of workers in order to boost share values.

Under provisions of a memorandum of understanding titled “Production Standards and Other Issues,” the UAW gives the green light to intrusive electronic monitoring of workers to enforce speedup. This includes “utilization of relevant technology to support workstation optimization including digital video recording and walk path mapping devices. The local parties may agree to implement motion tracking systems and additional productivity improvement tools.”

The memorandum goes on to state that the technology will not be “used as the sole basis for disciplinary action,” which means that it will, in fact, be used to discipline workers.

The plan for employer monitoring of workers signals management’s intent to establish a work regime similar to that of Amazon and other companies, where every movement of workers is tracked. Workers are encouraged to compete with one another and prodded to increase output. Those deemed to be “inefficient” are set on a track for dismissal.

Amazon has taken out patents on wristband technology that can be used to track workers. The wristband would emit ultrasonic sound pulses or radio

transmissions to let management monitor workers’ hand movements, or emit vibrations if workers move in the wrong direction.

In March, Ford hired the former Amazon president of finance, Tim Stone, as its new chief financial officer. Stone, a 20-year veteran of Amazon, oversaw the company’s brutal cost-cutting, including cuts imposed as part of the acquisition of Whole Foods.

After the takeover, Whole Foods workers saw their hours slashed. Workers reported that, despite shorter shifts, the company did not hire additional employees. Workers were simply required to accomplish the same tasks in less time.

Increasingly, Ford and other auto manufacturers are using Kronos and similar workplace monitoring technologies to track employees and squeeze every second of labor time out of workers.

A worker at the Ford Sterling Axle plant north of Detroit said opposition at his factory to the contract is growing. Of the plans for employee surveillance, he said, “It’s BS. They can speed up the line or program robots to mimic our movements. They could give you more work, impose discipline or speed up the line. Once that kind of language gets into a contract, you know how it goes...”

A Ford Kentucky Truck Plant worker in Louisville commented on some of the effects of the increased surveillance and its use for discipline. “Hell, they could write you up for anything.”

The worker gave an example of the draconian rules that Ford utilizes to cut costs and discipline workers. “Some around here listen to music to make the day go by faster. If we want to listen to music, we are not supposed to plug it in because we are not allowed to

use Ford's power. They can and will confiscate your radio, which might be returned sometime, but it depends upon the union.”

The efforts of the UAW to push through the Ford contract, following the shutdown of the GM strike, take place in the wake of UAW President Gary Jones being forced to step aside after having been implicated in a corruption scandal involving the theft of more than \$1 million in workers' dues money.

The Ford contract follows the pattern set by the UAW-General Motors agreement, which was ratified, according to the UAW, by a 57 percent margin following a 40-day strike. The contract fails to restore any past concessions, maintains the hated multi-tier wage structure, and paves the way for a vast expansion of temporary part-time workers. Despite claims by the UAW that it has achieved a “pathway” to full-time status for temps, these workers must wait three years to be made full-time, and they must start over at day one if they are laid off for more than 30 days.

Further, the contract makes it easier for management to fire workers. The number of allowed absences before termination is reduced from 9 to 7. Failure to work scheduled overtime will be counted as an unexcused absence.

The contract also allows the UAW and management to set up new health care provider networks with fewer doctors, hospitals and labs and lower reimbursement rates to doctors. Those doctors who do not accept the lower rates will not participate.

The paltry three percent wage increases in the first and third year of the contract will be quickly eaten up by inflation. The deal sanctions the closure of the Romeo, Michigan engine plant and maintains the “competitive” wage structure at the Rawsonville, Michigan and Sterling Axle plants, where pay is capped at just \$22.50 an hour.

On the question of job security, the contract summary is silent on the future of the Flat Rock Assembly Plant south of Detroit and the Buffalo Stamping Plant, speaking only of a “viability strategy” and “competitiveness” for the facilities. This suggests that the UAW may work out a substandard pay rate at these plants, using the threat of closure to force workers to accept a deal similar to that at Sterling Axle and Rawsonville.

The Sterling Axle worker said, “At the Flat Rock

plant no one knows if they are going to close the plant or if that is just a rumor. It looks like a trial balloon to see if they can get a competitive wage structure.”

To the extent that workers have voted to approve the contract or abstained from the vote, it is not an expression of confidence in the corrupt UAW. Ford workers witnessed the result of the 40-day strike by GM workers. The UAW demonstrated that it will starve workers on the picket line only to bring back essentially the same rotten contract offered by the company in the first place. At GM, the union obtained ratification of an agreement tailored to please Wall Street investors, who celebrated the deal by driving up GM stock.

To oppose the union-management conspiracy, workers must construct new organizations of struggle. Workers cannot allow their jobs and livelihoods to be held hostage to a corrupt organization that serves as an adjunct of management.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers to form rank-and-file committees in every workplace. These committees will fight to overturn the contracts negotiated by the UAW and launch a united fight by autoworkers for the restoration of all concessions, the ending of tiers and the hiring of all temporary workers as full-time.



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