

Mass abstention as UAW forces through Fiat Chrysler contract

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Amid significant opposition, the United Auto Workers declared its tentative agreement at Fiat Chrysler (FCA) ratified on Wednesday night. The contract passed by approximately 76 percent, according to *Automotive News*' unofficial tallies of results announced by union locals. This is a wider margin than the votes at Ford and General Motors, where the tentative deals passed by only 54 and 56 percent, respectively.

The most significant feature of the vote was mass abstention. While several locals have yet to publish their results, it appears that the abstention rate was fifty percent or even higher. With only 11,756 “yes” votes tabulated so far, it appears that only a small minority of FCA’s 47,000 hourly US workers actually voted in favor of the contract. Far more either voted against or abstained.

As always, no figures quoted by the UAW can be taken at face value. The balloting process is not independently monitored, and autoworkers have accused the UAW of voting irregularities and ballot fraud in previous votes.

But even taking the vote as given, the results do not reflect widespread support for the contract, any more than the votes at Ford and GM. The deal is a sellout which in some ways is even worse than the concessions forced through at the other two Detroit automakers. It will allow the auto giant, which is in the process of a merger with PSA that will form the fourth largest automaker in the world, to maintain the lowest hourly labor costs of the Detroit Three.

The contract does not even include the unattainable three-year “pathway” for regular employment for temporary workers at GM and Ford. Instead, FCA will roll over existing temporary workers at its discretion as full-time positions become available.

The vote is in fact a vote of no confidence in the UAW. Fiat Chrysler workers knew that the UAW would not come back with anything better if they voted against the contract. Moreover, they were in no mood to be strung out and isolated on the picket line, as GM workers were two months ago, forced to subsist on \$275 per week in strike pay during the Christmas holidays.

Only four years ago, the same FCA workforce voted down the first tentative agreement by a two-to-one margin, the first defeat of a national auto contract in decades, sparking a rank-and-file rebellion against the union. The UAW responded by forcing FCA workers to vote again on virtually the same contract. No doubt, this time around it decided to present FCA workers with a *fait accompli* by forcing them to vote last.

The vote, moreover, was rammed through by the UAW as fast as possible. It announced vote totals Wednesday night only one week after the agreement was first approved by the union’s FCA National Council. This left workers with no time to study the sprawling contract, which spans over 1,000 pages across three white books.

At Jefferson Assembly in Detroit, abstention rates were 41 percent. Several miles north at Sterling Heights Assembly, 49 percent of workers abstained. At Toledo and Warren Truck, half of the hourly workforce abstained.

Nevertheless, there were a small but significant number of facilities which returned “no” votes. Hourly workers at Toledo Assembly narrowly defeated the contract by a few dozen votes. Skilled workers at Jefferson and Sterling Heights also voted down the contract.

While results from Marysville Axle have not yet been announced, it is likely that workers there have voted

down the contract decisively. The contract leaves the plant under threat of closure when Fiat Chrysler pulls out in 2021. The opposition among workers at the facility was so intense that the local president issued a statement calling for a “no” vote.

With the official end of the 2019 contract talks, autoworkers find themselves at a crossroads. The majority of workers have correctly taken the measure of the UAW as an organization which is completely hostile to the interests of the workers it falsely claims to represent.

That the UAW is a criminal syndicate controlled by the auto companies is no longer in dispute.

The widening corruption scandal, which has already brought down much of the top leadership and forced the resignation of UAW President Gary Jones, has exposed to the world the multi-million dollar bribes and kickbacks which are a way of life for the UAW bureaucrats, whose “legitimate” incomes also run in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Even General Motors calls the UAW, in a recent lawsuit against Fiat Chrysler, an “FCA-controlled enterprise.” All of the companies have funneled millions into the pockets of the bureaucracy.

Any illusions that the UAW can be reformed, through a combination of mass pressure and legal compulsion by federal prosecutors, into a responsive, democratic organization have been refuted by its own actions during the contract talks. Faced with the danger of rebellion from the rank and file, the UAW called a national strike at General Motors not to fight the company but to soften workers up by isolating and starving them before forcing through a pro-company contract. Faced with the real possibility of a government takeover of the union under federal racketeering laws, the UAW apparatus pivoted by announcing toothless reforms at the same time that they ran roughshod over the democratic rights of GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers.

What autoworkers require is a new organization and perspective to carry their struggle forward, based on mobilizing their own independent strength in opposition to the corrupt UAW. This strength can only be activated by forming rank-and-file factory committees, which are independent of the UAW and begin not with what the companies are willing to give, but what the working class urgently requires.

Autoworkers confront not just particularly greedy companies, but the capitalist system, a global system of exploitation. To fight it, workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters internationally. The broad opposition to capitalist exploitation must be united on a world scale and turned into a politically conscious struggle for socialism, including the transformation of the global auto industry into a public enterprise, collectively owned and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

The 2019 contracts are not the end, but only the beginning. The conditions in the plants which will result from the UAW-backed concessions will generate newer and more explosive waves of opposition. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* will do everything possible to assist workers in building rank-and-file factory committees, uniting with workers in Canada, Mexico and around the world, and providing the socialist perspective and leadership necessary for the coming battles. For more information, contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.



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