

Canadian autoworkers demand Unifor release tentative contracts with Detroit Three in full prior to ratification votes

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With the contracts between the Detroit Three and Unifor covering 17,000 workers at its Canadian operations set to expire September 21, a petition demanding the union release any tentative contract agreement in its entirety before workers vote on it is winning significant rank-and-file support.

The legitimate demand for workers to be able to review any Unifor-blessed deals before voting on them is the outcome of bitter experience. Unifor and its predecessor the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) have recommended one concessions deal after another that imposed plant closures, wage freezes, benefit cuts, the gutting of work rules and the institutionalization of a low-wage two-tier system for workers hired after 2008. Invariably, these contracts have been imposed through highly-scripted union ratification meetings, with workers seeing no more than union-drafted “contract highlights.”

The petition reads:

“The undersigned demand Unifor leadership provide full disclosure of the contents of the contract, 5 days before ratification, by publishing all revisions, additions, deletions and changes to the contract, clearly marked, on the Unifor National website and the websites of the locals involved in ‘Detroit Three’ bargaining. The UAW does this with their ‘white book’. We also demand that the ratification highlights include a clear statement of all money and benefits negotiated on behalf of union representatives and any money or benefits negotiated to be paid to the Locals and/or National Union.”

The petition, launched on August 14, is a sign of growing worker opposition to and distrust of the Unifor leadership.

At the time of writing, it had already garnered about 1,300 signatures from autoworkers in at least eight locals across southern Ontario. Unifor president Jerry Dias, aware of the petition and preparing to negotiate another concessions deal, has thus far publicly ignored it, while indicating in private that the Unifor apparatus is determined to keep workers in the dark.

This is hardly surprising given the viciously anti-democratic record of Dias and the entire Unifor leadership. In 2016, when Dias presented a so-called pattern “framework agreement” that lacked any details on his “promise” that he had secured a “historic” deal to save jobs at GM Oshawa, workers there and

at the GM St. Catharines facility and then at Ford’s Oakville plant took up the call to see the full, approximately 200-page contract rather than the brief, misleading and self-serving “highlights brochure” handed out to workers as they entered the ratification meetings.

At the 2016 ratification meeting in Oshawa, workers denounced the lack of information before the arrogant Dias, to roars of outrage, called a particularly diligent questioner an “idiot.” Unifor then opened the voting booths before other rank-and-file autoworkers could even speak. Two years later, GM announced the imminent closure of the plant using contract language that had never appeared in the lying brochure.

Unifor’s manipulation of the contract ratification process, however, is only a symptom of a far deeper cancer. One that, from the standpoint of the defence of workers’ interests, long ago reached the terminal stage.

Like the UAW south of the border, Unifor long ago renounced any association with the militant struggles out of which the UAW was born as an organization representing Canadian and US auto workers, and acts in concert with the auto bosses against its own members.

Yet, despite decades of concessions and the ever-deeper integration of Unifor into corporate management, the organizers of the petition are claiming that the Unifor leadership can be pressured into serving workers’ interests, or at the very least that the union apparatus can be reformed.

On the website promoting the petition (solidaritymovement.ca), the administrators write: “This request should not be construed as an attack on leadership but rather an opportunity to strengthen communication and trust between leadership and the membership. Our union’s constitution is built on transparency and democratic values; informing and educating the membership is key to upholding these principles.” They go on to appeal for a struggle based on “union values,” and cite approvingly a quote from former Canadian Auto Workers President Bob White, “Workers don’t need a union to walk them backwards.” The appeal concludes with the call for workers to “start fighting like hell.”

There is no shortage of militancy among autoworkers, who

are livid over the decades of concessions imposed by the automakers in close cooperation with Unifor and the CAW.

But militant calls to “fight like hell” for “union values” ring hollow, to say the least, under conditions in which the vast majority of autoworkers cannot remember a time when Unifor or its CAW predecessor fought for anything other than the profitability of the Big Three and their cozy relationships with management at GM, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler. An honest description of Unifor’s “values” would be the acceptance of wage and benefit reductions, increased discipline and the intensification of workloads in order to maintain at least a modicum of auto sector investment in Canada and thereby defend its dues base from which the bureaucracy reap their own bloated salaries and expense accounts.

In comparison to Dias, who personifies the corrupt corporatist relations between the union bureaucracy, big business and the federal Liberal government, White may appear to some workers as a “no nonsense” militant. But the truth is, it was White’s policies while heading the Canadian UAW and then the CAW during the 1980s and early 1990s that helped initiate the race to the bottom in working conditions, wages, and workplace benefits that continues to this day.

In the run-up to the 1985 split with the UAW, White explicitly opposed any appeal to the widespread “no concessions” sentiment among American autoworkers and for a joint struggle of workers on both sides of the border against the right-wing UAW International leadership. Instead, White touted Canadian nationalism as he manoeuvred to reach an arrangement with Solidarity House to establish the CAW and enable each nationally-based wing of the union bureaucracy to pursue its own course. The split facilitated the automakers’ drive to pit Canadian autoworkers against their class brothers and sisters in the United States and Mexico.

White and the CAW’s “Canadian advantage” strategy, which was based on the lower value of the Canadian dollar and state-funded health care, quickly proved ruinous for workers. Seizing on the national divisions promoted by the CAW and UAW, the globally-operating automakers began whipsawing job, wage and benefit cuts back and forth across national borders.

In the current contract struggle, workers must recognize that Unifor is no less a determined and ruthless opponent of their interests than management. Only by organizing independently of the pro-company union to oppose another sellout contract will workers put themselves in a position to defend their jobs and living standards. Already, a path toward such action is being cut in the auto plants in the United States, where autoworkers have begun establishing rank-and-file safety committees independently of and in opposition to the corrupt UAW to fight for safe working conditions during the coronavirus pandemic.

Workers who want to fight for their democratic right to see the contract in full before they vote on it should emulate their American colleagues and establish rank-and-file committees in

every Canadian plant. These committees should take control of the contract struggle out of the hands of the Unifor bureaucracy, formulate demands to secure the jobs and living standards of all autoworkers, demand that all negotiations take place in public, and insist that all agreements be made available well in advance of any final vote.

The experience of US autoworkers with the UAW’s cynical commitment to publish tentative agreements before ratification votes only underscores the impossibility of “democratizing” the corporatist unions. While it is formally true that under pressure from rank-and-file workers the UAW now releases Detroit Three contracts in advance, this amounts to little more than a document dump, with workers presented documents running to a thousand or more pages and written in legalese. Moreover, none of this has stopped the UAW from manipulating the balloting, including forcing workers to “keep voting until you get it right,” as was this case with the 2015 Fiat Chrysler deal.

Last but not least, there is the fact that it has now been exposed that the top UAW leadership is a criminal conspiracy. Ten UAW officials, including former UAW President Gary Jones, have pleaded guilty to charges ranging from violation of labour laws, racketeering, embezzlement, conspiracy and tax fraud for their corrupt dealings with the automakers.

Significantly, Dias has maintained radio silence on the UAW corruption scandal, except to insist that it in no way calls into legitimacy the contracts that the union negotiated.

Rank-and-file committees, independent of Unifor, need to be developed in the Canadian plants as the springboard to seize the conduct of the fight for a new contract out of the hands of the union bureaucrats, forge unity with autoworkers in the US and Mexico and organize a counteroffensive against all concessions, two-tier wages, and job cuts.



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