Canadian Detroit Big Three autoworkers give strong strike mandate for upcoming contract fight

Carl Bronski
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The 17,000 workers employed at the Canadian operations of the Detroit Big Three automakers have voted overwhelmingly to authorize Unifor to launch strike action should a negotiated settlement not be reached by the September 21st contract expiry deadline.

At Ford Canada, workers voted by 96.4 percent to give Unifor a strike mandate. At Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) 98.4 percent of those participating in the online ballot voted in favour, while at General Motors (GM) there was a 95.3 percent "yes" vote.

The massive strike votes underscore that autoworkers are ready to wage a militant struggle to defend their jobs, wages, and working conditions, and overturn the decades of concessions imposed by the corporations with Unifor's support.

The Detroit Big Three bosses, for their part, are preparing for another round of sweeping attacks, with a number of Canadian plants facing the threat of possible shutdown or job cuts. Ford has announced that there will be no new products for its Oakville assembly plant after the Edge SUV is phased out in 2023. At Fiat-Chrysler's Brampton assembly facility, Unifor says major investments are needed to retain jobs. Two vehicle models would need to be added at FCA's Windsor Assembly to rehire the third shift workers, who were laid off earlier this year. Also under threat is FCA's Etobicoke aluminum casting plant and half of the 1,300 jobs at GM's St. Catharine's propulsion and engine facility.

Even before COVID-19 triggered the economic collapse, the Detroit Big Three and the other transnational automakers had launched a major restructuring of auto production worldwide, announcing job cuts and plant closures. They did so with the double aim of boosting their profit margins and outperforming their rivals, above all, in investor returns in order to attract the capital needed to take the lead in the transition to electric and autonomous vehicles.

Now they intend to invoke the pandemic-related sales and profit plunge to intensify their push for speedup and concessions, while slashing hundreds of thousands of auto jobs in North America, Europe, and Asia.

In response, Unifor's has been to double down on its nationalist-corporatist program. Predicated on the subordination of workers' interests to investor-profit, this consists of ensuring the Detroit Big Three's Canadian operations are pumping out profits equal to or greater than those the automakers earn elsewhere, by offering up further concessions and by appealing to the Ontario and Canadian governments to provide them with corporate handouts.

In a statement to the press following last weekend's strike votes, Unifor President Jerry Dias said the union's priorities in the contract talks were "job security, product commitments and economic gains for all members." He continued, "We will continue to push our agenda at the bargaining table but remind government that they have an active role to play in securing our auto industry's future. A future made in Canada."

Dias's stress on a "Made in Canada" solution to the threatened jobs massacre and fresh concession demands is a continuation of the union's ruinous nationalist strategy, which has pitted autoworkers in Canada, the US and Mexico against each other in competing for "product." The result has been the destruction of tens of thousands of auto jobs just in Canada alone over the past three decades, and round after round of concessions, including wage and benefit cuts and the creation of a multitiered workforce.

The overriding concerns of Dias and the other Unifor bureaucrats is not worker "job security" and "economic gains," but the retention of a highly-exploited, dues-paying base from which to fund the bureaucracy's lavish salaries and of a close working relationship between Unifor, the automakers, and the federal and provincial governments.

The fact that Unifor and the auto bosses share a common goal of ratcheting up the exploitation of autoworkers to ensure "corporate competitiveness" was underlined by Unifor's latest bargaining update. Writing like corporate executives plotting to gain market share and boost profits at the expense of their competitors, the union declared, "Despite notable challenges facing the Canadian auto sector, the union believes each of the facilities is viable and, with strategic investments, well equipped for growth in the coming years. The union also

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signalled its intent to discuss investments in vehicle electrification, to capture a meaningful share of what will be a significant growth market in the years ahead."

The decades of givebacks and job losses presided over by Unifor and its forerunner, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), reveal the failure of this nationalist, corporatist strategy. The CAW bureaucrats split from the United Auto Workers (UAW) in 1985, hoping that they could cut separate deals with GM, Ford and Chrysler based on the lower labour costs the automakers enjoyed in Canada due to the cheaper Canadian dollar and the government-funded health care system (Medicare).

The pursuit of this "Canadian advantage" proved disastrous as the UAW imposed deep wage cuts on US autoworkers, and the Detroit-based automakers expanded to Mexico for even cheaper labour. The auto bosses, with the unions' unyielding support, were then able to use these nationalist divisions to whipsaw jobs and wages across borders in a never-ending race to the bottom. In the process, CAW/Unifor, like the UAW and all the procapitalist trade unions, was transformed into nothing more than junior partners of the corporations and the state.

Whenever the union bureaucrats have persuaded governments to subsidize the "Canadian footprint" of the Detroit Big Three, this financial support has been bound up with sweeping attacks on workers' wages and working conditions.

Following the 2008 financial crash, the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments handed $13.7 billion over to the auto bosses at General Motors and Chrysler, while extorting wage and benefit concessions from autoworkers. This included the slashing of wages and benefits by 20 percent and the introduction of the notorious two-tier wage system. Since the bailout cash was handed out, thousands more jobs have been cut with entire plants being shuttered in Oshawa, Windsor, and St. Thomas, Ontario.

The current concessions contracts, which were grudgingly ratified by workers in 2016, expire at 11:59 p.m. on Monday, September 21. Early next week Dias is expected to announce which of the three automakers the union has selected as its "target" for negotiating a so-called pattern-settlement. After Monday's announcement of the results of the strike vote, Unifor Local 444 President Dave Cassidy in Windsor, Ontario told reporters that he is lobbying Dias to select FCA.

Irrespective of which company Dias chooses to begin negotiations with, it is clear that if the Unifor bureaucracy remains in control, there will be nothing adversarial about them. Rather, the bargaining process will develop as a conspiracy against the 17,000 autoworkers. In a May interview with *Automotive News Canada* previewing the contract negotiations, Dias all but ruled out strike action, declaring that if "after months and months and months of reduced volume based on the pandemic" things are "starting to get back to a resemblance of where they were pre-crisis, no one is going to want a disruption. And I mean nobody, both the workers and the automakers."

There is widespread rank-and-file opposition to the corporatist, nationalist strategy advanced by Dias and his fellow bureaucrats. Some 1,400 workers at auto plants across Ontario have signed a petition demanding that the union release any agreement in full, well in advance of ratification votes. This expresses the deep distrust felt by the rank and file towards the bureaucracy, which is well-practiced at smuggling major concessions into contracts behind the backs of workers by leaving them out of the self-serving "highlights" brochures handed out at ratification votes.

The task facing autoworkers is to transform this latent opposition into an organized rebellion against Unifor and its reactionary procorporate policy. To do this, autoworkers must organize rank-and-file action committees to seize control of the contract struggle from the union and mount a worker-led counteroffensive to overturn concessions, and guarantee decent-paying and secure jobs for all.

Such a struggle must be based on an international strategy aimed at mobilizing autoworkers across North America and around the globe in a common struggle in defence of ***all*** workers' jobs and against all concessions.

Without a doubt, an appeal from Canadian autoworkers for a joint struggle would win immediate support from autoworkers in Mexico, who last year mounted a wave of wildcat strikes in opposition to the procompany unions, and in the United States, where a network of rank-and-file safety committees has been organized in opposition to the corrupt UAW. Autoworkers set up these committees to combat the life-threatening conditions in the plants produced by the reckless back-to-work drive mounted by the companies, with the UAW's support, amid the ongoing pandemic.

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