

With Canadian Detroit Three auto contracts set to expire, Unifor rushes to reach concessionary “pattern” settlement

Carl Bronski
21 September 2020

With the contracts covering 6,300 production and skilled-trades workers at Ford Canada set to expire tonight, both corporate management and Unifor have stressed their determination to reach an agreement tailored to the company’s interests. Although Unifor President Jerry Dias has been forced to admit that the parties are “far apart” in talks, both Dias and Ford representatives have gone out of their way to praise their cooperation in the negotiations, which are emerging ever more clearly as a conspiracy against autoworkers.

Dias is hoping to trade off further concessions on work rules and, at best, meagre wage and benefit “increases” in exchange for the automaker giving a new product commitment for the threatened Oakville Assembly Plant. The company employs about 4,500 workers there, and an additional 1,600 workers at its two engine facilities in Windsor.

The cornerstone Oakville plant has already experienced almost 1,000 layoffs in just over a year, and is reported to be the Detroit Three plant in Canada most vulnerable to closure in the near future. Industry analysts citing multiple “well-placed sources” have placed a question mark over operations continuing past 2023, when scheduled production runs of the Ford Edge SUV and Lincoln Nautilus are slated to end.

Ford Chief Operating Officer Jim Farley, who will take over as CEO October 1, enthused that talks with Unifor are “going great.” Farley added, “I’ve talked with Mr. Dias and all the political leaders in Canada. It’s a very important negotiation for Ford. We’re working through it now.”

These remarks must be taken as a warning by all autoworkers. Ford has made it absolutely clear that it

will only accept a deal that ensures its “global competitiveness.” Under conditions in which all major automakers are laying off tens of thousands of workers internationally to boost corporate profitability and facilitate their transition to electric and autonomous vehicle production, the news that Farley is engaging with “political leaders” can only mean that Ford is in the advanced stages of securing state-backed subsidies to engineer a pro-corporate restructuring of Canada’s auto sector at the expense of autoworkers.

In this, Unifor is a willing partner. Dias informed Ford workers in a recent bargaining update that he picked Ford as the target company in contract talks because it has “a vision closely aligned with our own.” The company’s bargaining team, he gushed, has been “incredibly professional.” In the update, the union stated that negotiations “have proceeded well since Labour Day, with early progress made at the local committee tables, sub-committee tables and master tables.”

Unifor is in full agreement with management that the reactionary multi-tier wage system must continue to be enforced. “Our union approaches the 2020 round of bargaining with a clear mandate from the members to carefully review, assess and further improve on the New Hire Program,” says Unifor’s Bargaining Update #3. In other words, the “New Hire Program”—which was agreed to in 2012 and enables the highly-profitable automakers to pay new hires substantially less for a decade or more for doing the same work—is to remain in place.

A major factor in Unifor’s determination to impose concessions is its push for a three-year contract with Ford, which would synchronize with the next round of

United Auto Worker (UAW) contract renewals with the Detroit Three in the United States in 2023. Since they split along national lines in 1985, both Unifor (the former Canadian Auto Workers) and the UAW have pitted workers against each other in a never-ending race to the bottom. They have worked with their “own” corporate managements to “whip-saw” jobs and wages back and forth across borders, while promoting, respectively, Canadian and American nationalism, thereby dividing autoworkers and blocking the emergence of a common struggle against all concessions, job cuts, and plant shutdowns.

Dias’ attempt to synchronize contract years is aimed at taking this fratricidal scramble of each against all to a new stage. Even the pro-company Center for Automotive Research think tank has written that the proposal is pregnant with possibilities for corporate “whip-sawing.” For his part, Ford executive Gary Johnson said that the company will be amenable to such a proposal depending on “how it helps us.”

Despite their close collaboration, the parties may fail to reach a deal by today’s 11:59 PM deadline. In an *Automotive News* article published Thursday, Dias declared that the union and Ford are “miles apart” on wages, benefits, working conditions and job security. These remarks are no doubt in part meant for public consumption, so that Dias can later claim that union officials “fought hard” to secure the best deal possible.

If Unifor does decide to call a strike, it will not with the aim of mobilizing the power of autoworkers and working people more broadly. Instead, Unifor will use it allow workers to let off steam while it continues its backroom talks with Ford on how to impose further concessions and speed-up.

The last time a strike was called during a Detroit Three bargaining round in Canada was in 1996. On the likelihood of a strike, Ford’s head of manufacturing and labor affairs, Gary Johnson, told *Automotive News*, “I wouldn’t try to handicap it, but it’s the last thing we want to do. We’re going to do what’s fair to the company and fair to employees, but I’m not expecting a strike. But you never know. Maybe things change and it’s something you do, but that’s not the goal.”

If a deal is reached, Unifor will undoubtedly move as swiftly as possible to have it ratified so that workers have no time to study its rotten contents. Due to social distancing protocols, the contract ratification process

this year will be conducted online. The very fact that workers will be unable to meet en masse to discuss any tentative deal makes it all the more urgent that workers demand that any contract presented to them for ratification be made accessible in full at least one week before any vote takes place. Yet despite a petition launched by rank-and-file workers making this very demand (and to date signed by almost 1,800 autoworkers), Dias has refused to even address the issue.

Unifor’s contempt for the democratic rights of its members is in keeping with its hostility to all of their basic interests, including the defence of their wages, working conditions, and jobs. As the World Socialist Web Site *Autoworker Newsletter* explained in a recent statement, “The alternative is to mobilize autoworkers in Canada, the US, and Mexico in a joint counter-offensive to overturn all concessions and defend all jobs. Such a counter-offensive can be developed only through a political and organizational break with Unifor and the UAW.

“There is an enormous well of rank-and-file anger against the auto bosses and their Unifor accomplices. But if workers are to prevent Unifor from once again running their struggle into the ground and corralling them into voting on a concessionary contract whose true details they have not been allowed to see, they must act now. They must take matters into their own hands by building a network of rank-and-file committees in all Detroit Three and auto industry plants.”



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