

Why is Unifor hiding details of the Ford Canada “pattern” contract?

Autoworkers must demand full disclosure prior to any ratification vote!

Carl Bronski
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Speaking like a representative of corporate management, Unifor President Jerry Dias claimed Tuesday that the tentative agreement reached with Ford Canada was “historic.” He bragged about the “home run” hit by his negotiating team in securing \$1.8 billion Canadian dollars in corporate investment and government handouts to retool the threatened Oakville Assembly Plant for eventual electric car production—even though there is as of yet no final deal between Ford and the provincial and federal governments.

Behind all the hype, the most striking thing about Tuesday’s press conference was Unifor’s failure to provide even the most basic information about the tentative agreement.

All the ducks, dives and pirouettes performed by Dias during his announcement were a desperate effort to conceal the fact that Unifor negotiators have agreed to wage restraint, concessions on benefits and work rules, the continuation of the hated two-tier system (with at best a few tweaks) and the proliferation of temporary part-time employees combined with continuing permanent job losses at the cornerstone Oakville operation.

If Unifor and Dias get their way, the 6,300 Ford Canada workers will not be allowed to even lay eyes on a copy of the contract before being herded onto the electronic voting page at this Sunday’s online ratification meeting. Instead, in line with the union’s long-standing anti-democratic procedures, workers will be provided a presentation of contract “highlights” by way of a self-serving slide show. Workers, watching at home on their smart phones and laptops, will not have any opportunity to reflect on the deal and discuss it with workmates, let alone see the hundreds of pages of fine print.

Autoworkers must act now to ensure that such a travesty does not occur! They should oppose Unifor’s sham ratification process, demand that the contract be released in

full, and insist workers be accorded a period of at least one week to study and discuss the contract before any vote is held. To fight for these demands, workers in every plant should establish a rank-and-file committee independently of and in opposition to the pro-corporate Unifor to advance their own demands and unify their struggle with their class brothers and sisters in the United States and Mexico.

Such a struggle would find broad support among autoworkers across the Detroit Three’s operations in Canada and beyond. In the United States, autoworkers have already begun establishing such committees to combat the corrupt UAW’s connivance with corporate management to return the auto plants to “normal” production amid a raging pandemic. Mexican workers, meanwhile, played a major role in the rank-and-file protests that swept North America in the early stages of the pandemic and forced a temporary shutdown of production.

About 1,800 autoworkers have already signed a petition demanding Unifor release the tentative contract in full and provide workers ample time to study it before voting. Dias, in a recent interview with *Automotive News*, arrogantly dismissed both this legitimate demand and his own membership. “I don’t chase mice when I’m hunting elephants,” he said when asked for his view of the petition.

If Unifor persists with its plans to ram through its Ford Canada deal this weekend, workers should massively vote “No.” Unifor’s refusal to allow workers to even see the proposed contract—denying them the democratic right to know what they are voting on—is itself reason enough to vote the agreement down.

What do we know so far about the deal, and what is Unifor hiding?

Nothing was said by Dias or in Unifor’s press release about the economic package, which the union ultimately wants to foist not just on workers at Ford, but also on those

at Fiat-Chrysler (which Dias has selected as the next bargaining target) and General Motors. This silence testifies to the fact that Unifor has agreed to three more years of wage restraint. Ford management has already made clear that any new investments in their Canadian facilities must leave the company “operationally competitive” in a period of a global economic downturn. In plain language, this means that the company has to be able to continue raking in bumper profits while workers are made to pay for the capitalist crisis with wage and benefit reductions.

Workers also have every right to be concerned about job security, under conditions where no new internal combustion product is scheduled in Oakville after 2023.

According to the Unifor president, Ford Canada and the federal Liberal and Ontario Conservative governments will invest CA\$1.95 billion in the automaker’s operations. Of this, according to Dias, a “significant amount” will be spent in converting the Oakville Assembly Plant to a facility that, starting in 2025, will be capable of producing up to five electric vehicle models. However, the fifth model is only scheduled to roll off the assembly line in 2028.

Dias did his best to keep Tuesday’s press conference focused on his heralding of the electric car investment plan in Oakville and a modest 2022 initiative to “stabilize” employment levels at Ford’s Windsor engine plants. He backed this up with reactionary calls for economic nationalism and corporatism, urging workers to tie their fate to Canadian producers of aluminum, nickel and other materials in a global scramble for “competitiveness” and market share in battery and electric vehicle production.

But near the end of the press conference question and answer period, he admitted that in Oakville the “historic” e-car conversion plan would result in a further reduction of jobs.

Currently, 3,400 autoworkers are employed at Oakville, more than a thousand less than last year. Due to electric car technology, it is estimated that at least 400 more jobs will eventually be lost. Responding to a question about the retooling of the plant, Dias admitted, “There’s no doubt... the plant will be down for a period of time.” He refused to say specifically how long this would be, and he did not elaborate on whether it would take until 2028 for the full promised contingent of 3,000 workers to be employed at Oakville.

Dias also refused to provide any details on the fate of 200 workers at the Bramalea parts distribution center. That facility is slated to close and be replaced by two small regional depots.

Another major area of concern is Unifor’s drive to permanently lower wages by forcing older, better-paid veterans to retire in favour of low-paid, second-tier workers. The period of downtime at the Oakville facility for retooling

will no doubt be seized upon to carry out this goal, which will secure a further windfall for Ford and its super-rich shareholders.

In a naked appeal for a contract “Yes” vote from young, low-seniority workers, many of whom are still on layoff, Dias conjured up a utopian future replete with home ownership and life-long employment. But Unifor’s ruthless defence of the hated multi-tier wage system makes such promises a cruel joke, given that the workers lucky enough to keep their jobs will be working for far less money and under more oppressive and exploitative conditions.

The work rules Unifor has agreed to, which will go a long way to determining these working conditions, is yet another area where no details have been provided. Given Ford’s insistence on remaining “globally competitive,” however, there is every reason to believe that Unifor has acceded to stepped-up production targets and other measures to boost “labour productivity.”

These unanswered questions underline the fact that any tentative contract that is not provided to the membership with ample time to read and discuss prior to voting must not be accepted. Workers must instead demand that the tentative agreement, together with any side letters and memorandums of understanding, be released in full and provided to all members well in advance of any meeting to discuss the agreement and ratification vote.

In response to the global offensive being waged by automakers to cut costs, restrain wages, increase the pace of work and threaten jobs, workers at the Detroit Three’s Canadian operations need to establish independent rank-and-file committees to take the contract struggle into their own hands and demand the restoration of all concessions and job security for all. This struggle can only go forward in unity with the fight of autoworkers in the United States, Mexico and internationally for secure, decent-paying jobs and an end to the reactionary race to the bottom incited by the nationalist, pro-capitalist UAW and Unifor unions.



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