

Canadian autoworkers' union, Unifor, hid major concessions in “pattern” contract with Ford

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Shortly after electronic voting closed for ratification of the contract negotiated between Unifor and Ford Canada, details of major concessions agreed to behind workers' backs appeared in the *Detroit Free Press*. These concessions were intentionally left out by Unifor in the self-serving contract “highlights” summary they presented workers, and they have not been widely reported since in the mainstream press.

The silence of the union, company, and corporate media on the concessions was deemed necessary so as to pull wool over workers' eyes as to the sweeping givebacks that Unifor has made in what it is touting as the “pattern” contract for the Detroit Three's 17,000 Canadian workers.

Unifor has effectively surrendered the hallowed principles of the eight hour day and overtime pay provisions. In addition, it has agreed to a scheme to create a large third tier of workers on the shop floor by flooding the auto plants with a new wave of temporary part-time (TPT) workers.

Unifor has agreed to the implementation of an Alternative Work Schedule (AWS). This concession, Ford boasted in a press release, will help “maximize production flexibility” and corporate “efficiency,” ensuring that the automaker remains “globally competitive.”

The AWS, first introduced into US auto plants and widely hated by workers there, was imposed during the 2009 Obama administration-led restructuring of Chrysler and GM. It allows the automakers to run their plants longer, adding the equivalent of an extra 49 days of production annually compared with traditional plant schedules. It also allows the companies to cut tens of millions in labor costs by eliminating overtime payments for working more than a 40-hour week and on Saturday, which previously paid time-and-a-half.

AWS schemes can compel workers to labour at least 10

hours a day including at straight-time pay on weekends. Workers are at the whim of the corporations when it comes to setting work hours. In many plants, all the company needs to do is give 14-days' notice and it can force workers to toil whenever management deems it necessary, including workweeks with grueling shifts even beyond 10 hours. Seniority does not matter. This is akin to an “on call” provision, where the company can force workers to do as it pleases, when it pleases. The company can change start times each week if they so choose.

The AWS is also known as the 3-2-120 schedule because three crews work two shifts for 120 hours a week. While AWS schedules change, there have been instances at the FCA Jefferson North Assembly plant in Detroit, where an “A” crew has worked 10 hours a day on day shift from 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday. A “B” crew has worked 10 hours on night shift 6 p.m. to 4:30 a.m. on Wednesday through Saturday, and a “C” crew has worked 10 hours on the night shift Monday and Tuesday and 10 hours on the day shift Friday and Saturday. Under this schedule, the paid lunch break—won by auto workers decades ago—was also eliminated.

Recent Detroit Three contracts in the US have paved the way for the expanded use of lower-paid, temporary part-time workers in the factories. The deployment of ever more TPTs becomes even more necessary for the extraction of corporate profit under conditions where the gruelling AWS impacts attendance levels. To push against absenteeism, in UAW-Detroit Three agreements absences and lateness demerits are no longer “wiped clean” in ensuing contracts. Currently, FCA employs the highest percentage of second-tier and temporary workers out of the US-based Detroit Three auto companies, but the new Ford agreement adopts provisions that will allow Ford to quickly close that gap.

The reality is, had Unifor presented these provisions openly to the membership, their pattern agreement with Ford might well have been decisively rejected. As it turned out, Unifor President Jerry Dias and his fellow union bureaucrats managed to secure passage of the agreement with bogus promises of “job security,” and hyped claims about a \$1.8 billion investment in the Oakville Assembly Plant to retool it for electric vehicle production. As the WSWS explained in its initial article analyzing the ratified agreement: in exchange for investment commitments that are far from finalized, Unifor accepted the destruction of hundreds of jobs during the life of the new agreement, particularly among higher-paid legacy workers, who will be pushed into retirement.

At Unifor’s insistence, the Ford-pattern deal will run for three instead of the usual four years. This means it will expire in September 2023 at the same time as those between the UAW and the Detroit Three. Unifor wants to synchronize its Detroit Three contracts with the UAW’s not in order to facilitate a joint struggle by North American autoworkers. On the contrary, Dias has stressed that synchronized bargaining will allow Unifor to compete directly with the UAW for products and prevent the “migration of investment to Mexico.” In other words, it will bring about a further intensification of the race to the bottom in wages and working conditions, as the rival unions compete to demonstrate which can deliver the lower “labour costs.”

Autoworkers are very familiar with Unifor’s longstanding anti-democratic modus operandi of withholding important information from them at contract ratification meetings in order to induce a “Yes” vote. Unifor, as a matter of practice, refuses to release and distribute the full contract complete with all side-agreements and “Memorandums of Understanding” until months after a ratification vote takes place.

This has never “sat right” with thousands of workers at the Detroit Three auto plants in Canada. After all, the 2016 pattern contract at General Motors where Unifor guaranteed that auto assembly at the Oshawa plant would be saved was met only two years later by the company’s closure announcement based on a contract clause never presented or discussed with workers at the ratification meetings.

Unifor’s flagrant violation of Ford Canada workers’ basic democratic right to be fully informed of what they were voting on must be taken as a serious warning by autoworkers across Canada. Reports indicate that Unifor

may announce a rapid agreement with FCA as early as this weekend as it seeks to wrap up the current bargaining round as quickly as possible.

FCA workers must decisively reject all efforts to stampede them into voting on a deal they have not seen, especially since Dias has already made clear that it will follow the Ford concessions-laden pattern.

Unifor, like the pro-capitalist trade unions around the world, does not represent the interests of working people, but rather of a privileged bureaucracy focused above all on maintaining its lucrative partnerships with big business and capitalist governments. Attempts to “reform” the union or persuade it to “fight” on behalf of workers’ interests are doomed to fail. It is worth recalling in this regard that although over 1,800 workers—more than one in ten of the Detroit Three’s total Canadian workforce—signed a petition demanding that Unifor release agreements in full prior to any ratification vote, the union ignored it with contempt. “I don’t chase mice when I’m hunting elephants,” said Dias when asked for his view of the petition.

Workers at FCA, GM and Ford must act now to organize independently of Unifor by establishing rank-and-file committees to block its efforts to impose similar pro-corporate, job-cutting agreements as it has done at Ford.

These committees should demand the full release of any agreement reached between Unifor and FCA, and at least one week to study and discuss the terms before any ratification vote is held. They should also establish links with autoworkers in the United States, Mexico and internationally to prepare a unified counter-offensive by autoworkers against the hated two-tier system and all concessions and job cuts.



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