

Canadian autoworkers union “rowing in the same direction” as Ford and political establishment

Roger Jordan
9 October 2020

Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford, Unifor President Jerry Dias and Ford Canada CEO Dean Stoneley appeared Thursday at a joint online press conference to announce a government investment of \$590 million to retool Ford’s Oakville assembly plant beginning in 2024 for electric car and battery production. The federal and provincial governments will each contribute \$295 million as part of an overall \$1.8 billion plant conversion plan.

The press conference marked a new stage in the anti-worker, corporatist conspiracy between the trade unions, big business and the pro-corporate federal and provincial governments. This conspiracy is not simply the result of Dias’ contempt for autoworkers, though there is plenty of that to go around. It is the logical outcome of the unions’ reactionary Canadian nationalist and corporatist outlook, which claims that Canadian autoworkers and their bosses have the same interests, and that they must compete with their class brothers and sisters in the United States and Mexico for “investments” and “product.”

Dias could hardly contain his enthusiasm at the prospect of hundreds of millions of dollars in public funds being handed over to the giant automaker free of charge and with virtually no strings attached. “We’re all rowing in the same direction,” he crowed at the event. The Unifor president also lavished praise on Trudeau and Ontario’s right-wing populist Premier Doug Ford, who until recently boasted about his affinity with and support for Donald Trump.

The “same direction” referred to by Dias is to ensure corporate Canada is given enough free public funds to remain “competitive” on the world market and thereby

continue to attract investors. This requires that workers in the auto sector and all other areas of manufacturing be transformed into low-paid, precariously employed servants of big business. Ford will use the money it is receiving from both federal and provincial governments to continue its lavish payouts to its wealthy shareholders as it restructures its production facilities by expanding low-wage work, and guts employment standards and workers’ rights.

Dias remained silent on these restructuring plans at the press conference because he knows that they are viewed with hostility by autoworkers and broad sections of the working class as a whole.

In the recently-ratified three-year contract with Ford Canada, Dias and his fellow Unifor bureaucrats went a long way to creating such conditions. A retirement scheme will see jobs reduced by over 10 percent at the Oakville facility within a year, while the hated multi-tier wage system is perpetuated and expanded. Various incentives agreed upon to encourage more experienced workers to leave make clear that Unifor will push to get rid of as many higher paid workers as possible prior to the retooling of the plant in 2024 so that Ford can bring in new hires on much lower wages to produce the first electric vehicles in late 2025 or 2026.

Unifor also agreed to the flooding of the plant with third-tier Temporary Part-Time (TPT) workers and the introduction of a new Alternative Work Schedule, which destroys hard won principles around the eight-hour day and paid overtime. Dias knew full well that these rotten concessions would be so unpopular that he kept them under wraps until Ford workers had voted on the agreement.

Unifor, together with its Canadian Auto Workers

(CAW) predecessor, has always justified its kowtowing to the interests of big business by claiming that this is necessary to defend jobs. Unveiling the Ford contract last month, Dias spoke glowingly of the new investments in Oakville, which he claimed would provide autoworkers with the opportunity to “buy a house” and “start a family.”

But Unifor’s nationalism and corporatism have not saved a single job. Instead, they have facilitated the whipsawing of jobs, wages and benefits across national borders, pitting Canadian, American and Mexican workers against each other in a race to the bottom.

The job cuts will continue under the very Ford contract praised so highly by Dias. An appended letter from Ford Canada states that “up to 3,000 jobs” will be created in Oakville when electric vehicle production reaches full capacity in 2028. In other words, well below 3,000 workers may work at a facility that employed over 5,000 less than two years ago and where currently 3,400 people work. Moreover, as the contract terms agreed to by Unifor make clear, these jobs will be vastly inferior both in terms of pay and working conditions to those secured by autoworkers through bitter struggles during the 20th century.

Dias’ disgusting performance on Thursday as a corporate salesman has implications for workers across all sectors of the economy. Under conditions in which the super-rich are wealthier than ever before, thanks to the hundreds of billions of dollars handed over to the banks and financial markets by the Trudeau government at the start of the pandemic, Dias and the entire union bureaucracy are intensifying their efforts to protect the interests and wellbeing of corporate Canada in every area of the economy as conditions for all workers worsen dramatically.

At a press conference October 1 held jointly with the Air Canada Pilots Association and the Airline Pilots Association, Unifor called for the provision of \$7 billion in “immediate and direct financial relief” to the airlines. Undeterred by the fact that Canadian airlines have thrown over 30,000 workers out of work since the pandemic began, the unions complained in a press release that could have been co-written by the chief executives of Air Canada and WestJet, “(T)he harsh reality is that airlines are extremely capital intensive operations with a high cash burn rate and the requirement to preserve liquidity to maintain

equipment, routes, and staff.” In an article published by CBC, the Airline Pilots Association boasted about how it had persuaded its members at WestJet to accept a 50 percent pay cut, which was dressed up as necessary to save jobs.

The emergence of the unions as open advocates for the defence of corporate interests against the workers they claim to represent has been a process long in the making. During the 2008–09 financial crisis, the CAW worked with the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal government to ensure a multi-billion dollar bailout of the auto industry, which was tied to a devastating assault on autoworkers.

Over the past five years, the union bureaucracy has developed unprecedentedly close working relations with the Trudeau Liberal government. This has reached a new stage during the pandemic as the unions have issued joint statements with business lobby groups to justify the homicidal back-to-work campaign in the name of guaranteeing Canada’s “global competitiveness” during the “economic recovery.” This cooperation has been based on the unions’ systematic suppression of all opposition among workers to being forced to return to unsafe and dangerous workplaces.

Autoworkers must reject Dias’ shilling for corporate Canada with the contempt it deserves. The only way to defend all auto jobs and secure decent pay and safe working conditions is to fight to unify Canadian, American, and Mexican workers in an international worker counteroffensive to break the grip of corporate profit over all aspects of economic and social life. The first step in such a struggle must be a decisive political and organizational break with Unifor and its nationalist and corporatist perspective, and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees in every plant to fight for autoworkers’ demands.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact