

Growing opposition among Canadian autoworkers to Unifor's concessions-laden Detroit Three “pattern” contract

Our reporters
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With the deadline set to expire at 11:59 p.m. this evening for the contract talks between Fiat-Chrysler (FCA) and Unifor, opposition among rank-and-file autoworkers to the rotten sellout contract the union imposed on Ford workers is growing. The deal—which prepares the way for significant job cuts, the hiring of more temporary part-time workers, and the introduction of the gruelling and wage-cutting Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) system—will serve as the “pattern” for any agreement reached between Unifor and FCA, which employs some 9,000 workers in Canada.

Showing its usual contempt for the rights of its members, Unifor and its national president, Jerry Dias, have remained tight-lipped on the contents of their talks with FCA. In a vaguely-worded bargaining update released last Saturday, Unifor stated that one of “the slowest moving issues at the bargaining table” is investment commitments for new products at FCA’s Windsor and Brampton facilities.

FCA ended the third shift at its Windsor facility in July with the loss of around 1,300 jobs, and Dias has stated that two new products would be required to return these workers to the plant. A further product is also needed to secure the future of the Brampton assembly plant.

The acknowledgement that talks on investment are proving extremely slow suggests that the union may be preparing workers to accept a concessions-laden deal containing even greater givebacks than those ceded to Ford Canada. Unifor’s “pattern” contract includes early retirement schemes and other buyout options to significantly reduce the workforce, and commitments to impose speed-up and other punishing work rules on those workers who remain.

Unifor hid the concessions it made to Ford behind a propaganda blitz about a multi-billion dollar investment to convert the Oakville plant to build electric vehicles. In reality, this arrangement allows Ford to cash in on nearly \$600 million in federal and Ontario government subsidies. This will help the giant automaker continue making lavish payouts to shareholders, while workers bear the brunt of the restructuring of the industry.

In the Ford agreement, Unifor accepted the elimination of

more than 10 percent of the 3,400 jobs at the Oakville Assembly Plant within a year, and agreed to the AWS, which allows management at each plant to determine their own work schedule and abolish most overtime pay for extended shifts and weekend work. As shown by recent developments at FCA’s Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) north of Detroit, this can include 12-hour shifts for seven days in a row.

The decision to impose the AWS on skilled-trades workers at SHAP has been followed closely by autoworkers at other plants across the United States and Canada, thousands of whom have read WSWS articles on the subject.

In a statement appealing for autoworkers to establish rank-and-file committees to wage a fight for the overturning of the AWS and the restoration of the eight hour day, the SHAP Rank-and-File Safety Committee wrote, “This is an issue that affects us all, not just skilled trades. All over the country, and even the world, the eight-hour day is under attack. Our parts worker brothers and sisters at Faurecia Gladstone in Indiana are forced to work 12-hour days, seven days a week without even the week off in between like the schedule being proposed for skilled trades at Sterling Heights. In Canada, only a few short miles away from our plant, the Unifor union is forcing through the hated Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) on our Canadian brothers and sisters through lies. They simply did not tell anyone the new contract included AWS until after workers voted on the contract.” (See : **Restore the eight-hour day! Stop the move to 12-hour shifts for skilled trades workers at Michigan FCA plant**)

Unifor’s concealing of the worst concessions in the Ford contract until it had secured its ratification has provoked outrage among autoworkers at FCA as well as Ford and, the third Detroit Three automaker, GM. “Incredible even by Unifor standards!” an FCA worker at the Windsor plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “I suspected a little bit of a surprise from Jerry (Dias), but not to the degree of near criminal withholding of crucial information like this. I remember a time that we gasped at what our American brothers and sisters were forced into by the UAW. We were not convinced it wouldn’t happen in Canada and sure enough,

voila. The way this was done is so arrogant and shameless that it is hard to believe.”

The worker also remarked on a petition supported by some 1,800 autoworkers across the Detroit Three’s Canada operations demanding that Unifor release any agreement in full well in advance of any ratification vote. “Nothing has changed in the attitudes of the union. Nothing. Even the most open attack that I have seen in years led by grassroots activists made nary a dent in their mindset,” the worker commented. Referring sarcastically to a contemptuous remark by Dias about his view of the petition and the workers who signed it, the worker added, “‘Hunting elephants and not chasing mice’ indeed!”

Another Windsor FCA worker said she and her colleagues have had nothing but concessions contracts for the past 20 years. Referring to Unifor’s reactionary nationalist and corporatist strategy, which pits Canadian, US and Mexican workers against each other in a race to secure new “product” from the globally-organized automakers, she said that it was a mistake to focus on negotiating for investments instead of fighting to defend the eight-hour day and pensions. The worker noted that many of her colleagues are worried about the upcoming ratification process, before stating that she does not trust the bargaining committee.

A Ford Oakville worker added, “I know there was no knowledge about the Alternative Work Schedule previously. The people I talked to that did vote expressed that this left a bad taste in their mouths. That large signing bonus seems to have been the really nice belly rub that made many things unsettling about this contract digestible. Ford workers are currently on a 10-hour production schedule Monday to Thursday. I’m sure the thought process and spin is in the works to show workers they are not giving up much. I’m interested to see how workers feel about the OT structure change/pay cut when the plant goes back to 8-hour shifts, and the reality of the change sets in. Most damaging is, the pattern it sets in place for workers at other manufacturers who are on steady 8-hour three-shift operations. As your article stated, this is now them working harder for less.

“Needless to say, most likely a reason why Unifor decided Ford should be targeted with this contract is I’m sure workers would not give much thought to the losses incurred because of the 10x4 1x8 current work week. As you mentioned in your article, this is a huge unrealized financial hit to workers.”

The worker also addressed the issue of Unifor’s financial interests, which are at odds with those of the workers it claims to represent. “Unifor, in an underhanded deceitful manner uses the workers’ ignorance and the omission of pertinent information to get their job done,” said the worker. “If this new schedule of work means more precarious TPTs, it’s just more dues paying workers in the membership to them. Sickens me to know that Unifor is willing to take thousands out of seasoned workers’ pockets to fill their own pockets!”

Another autoworker issued a warning to FCA workers, writing to the *Newsletter*, “Wow FCA. You have to have

SOLIDARITY for sure on this. To think he (Dias) did this underhanded thing is disgusting to hear and see. To not be above board with your people [is] TERRIBLE. Call him on these things. Do not vote or wrap it up as he wants until you see the contract. If these statements had been shown to Ford [workers] I doubt very much he would have been patting himself on his back and laughing behind everyone’s back.”

Discussions involving autoworkers on social media revolved around what should be done in opposition to Unifor’s sellout. “I think Ford should have a walkout,” wrote one GM worker following the deal. “Look what happened to Oshawa, that says it all,” wrote another, a reference to the fact that GM announced the closure of its Oshawa Assembly Plant just two years after Unifor claimed to have secured a production guarantee for the full four-year contract finalized in 2016.

“When I worked at General Motors Diesel in London the union made concessions in every contract after 1992 and failed to inform the membership until after the ratification process was over,” wrote another worker. “Dias,” commented another, “is in it for himself. Nothing for workers or pensioners.”

The WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* appeals to autoworkers at FCA, Ford and GM to give their opposition to Unifor’s betrayals organized expression by following the example of their brothers and sisters in a growing number of US auto plants and establishing rank-and-file committees in every plant.

Acting independently of the pro-corporate unions, these committees should advance and fight for the demands of autoworkers, including: a jobs guarantee for all, including for those workers who have been laid off; the abolition of the hated two-tier system; a return to the eight-hour day; and safety measures in the plants funded by the companies to guard against the COVID-19 pandemic. To take this struggle forward, a network of rank-and-file committees should be established to unify Canadian, US and Mexican autoworkers in an international counteroffensive against the auto bosses.



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