

After rejecting UAW-backed contract, Ventra workers in Ohio press for strike

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Auto parts workers at the Flex-N-Gate subsidiary Ventra in Sandusky, Ohio, are pressing for strike action after rejecting by a three-to-one margin a contract backed by the United Auto Workers that would cut starting wages and extend the period for new hires to reach full pay. UAW Local 1216 officials were forced to withdraw the deal after the September 29 vote by the 2,200 workers who build headlamps for Ford.

After the rebellion by rank-and-file workers who placed “Vote No” signs around the plant, including one that said, “Stop UAW corruption,” Local 1216 President Brett Whyde sought to assure workers that UAW Region 2B Director Wayne Blanchard, who is leading the talks, was really on their side. “I can assure the entire membership, director Blanchard supports UAW Local 1216 as he, like your staff, works for you,” Whyde wrote in the letter. “We are preparing proposals based on the membership’s desires and demands,” he claimed.

Negotiations were set to resume on Monday for a new contract, months after the old one expired in July. In a letter to the membership posted on the union’s Facebook page on Wednesday, the local president tried to use the threat of mass layoffs or even a plant closure to intimidate workers, saying, “The Company shared the status of the Sandusky plant and the obstacles that we face economically and culturally.” The latter presumably refers to the company’s displeasure with a “culture” among workers who refuse to be industrial slaves despite the UAW’s best efforts.

It has taken more than two weeks for talks to resume since the membership rejected the tentative agreement by 78-22 percent. Meanwhile, workers are working on a day-to-day extension of the previous 2016 contract. The proposal that was rejected by workers would roll back new hire starting pay from the already poverty

wage of \$15.30 to \$15. It would also require a new hire to work three years to reach Level 1 whereas, in the previous contract, a new hire could reach scale in two years.

Additionally, the signing bonus was reduced from \$1,700 to \$1,500, the attendance policy was revised, and the union made other concessions.

For full-time workers, the revised rejected contract proposed raises of 30 cents per year for three years and 65 cents in the last year, with no raise at all until March 2021. Even this paltry amount was only renegotiated after Whyde delayed the ratification vote, originally planned for September 23, in the face of a near-rebellion by rank-and-file workers. Hearing “concerns” from members about a 1 percent increase per year and the lower starting rate for new hires, the union scraped up another half percent before going for ratification.

Hundreds of posts on the union’s Facebook page prior to the September 29 rejection vote indicated the feeling of workers in the plant. “Why? Do we have to wait 6 months for a raise of 30 cents??? And no back pay. They might get some people to wait for 95 cents, but waiting 6 months for 30 cents is BS without back pay.” Another worker said, “So, incentives are gone, bonus went down, what else did we lose, still 8 1/2 hour shifts, vacation the same just shuffled? No for me.”

Another worker posted an image of a grinning Shahid Khan, owner of Flex-N-Gate (and the Jacksonville Jaguars football team), in a news report about the Florida billionaire’s wealth increasing during the pandemic. According to the July article, Khan’s fortune had increased 39.5 percent to \$10.88 billion.

Flex-N-Gate is a privately-owned company, with revenues estimated at \$6.8 billion annually, supplying parts to the automotive industry. Khan purchased the

Sandusky plant from Ford Motor Co. in 2012 (the same year he purchased the Jaguars) and came to an agreement with UAW Local 1216 to pay new hires in production a starting rate of \$12.35 per hour, substantially lower than prevailing wages at Ford. The billionaire owns 66 facilities worldwide, with 25,000 employees.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reported earlier this year on the conditions faced by Flex-N-Gate workers in Detroit as they were forced to return to work unsafely in mid-May. In March, when wildcat strikes in auto plants forced the shutdown of factories around the country, the *Sandusky Register* reported that 70 workers at the Ventra plant were required to work over the weekend, with Local 1216's agreement, when all other workers were being sent home. The newspaper quoted one worker saying, "The union's not representing to us the way it should be."

The Sandusky Ventra workers are joining thousands of other workers—including Fiat Chrysler skilled trades workers at Sterling Heights Assembly and Canadian FCA workers whose contract has expired—who are determined to defend their living standards despite the coronavirus pandemic and company threats. Ventra workers must recognize that to carry out a struggle in defense of living standards requires the building of rank-and-file factory committees, completely independent of the corrupt UAW. These committees will unite workers across the auto industry and across borders to defend their jobs, abolish the two-tier wage system, restore the eight-hour day and secure decent living standards and safe working conditions for all workers.



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