

Unifor deal gives FCA Canada green light to cut jobs

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15 October 2020

Just minutes before Wednesday's 11:59 p.m. deadline, Unifor announced that it had reached a tentative agreement for a new three-year agreement covering 9,000 Fiat-Chrysler (FCA) Canada workers. Presented at a press conference by Unifor president Jerry Dias as a great victory, the deal is based on the continued shrinking of the workforce and the further entrenchment of a multi-tier wage system that will allow FCA to significantly reduce labour costs.

The centrepiece of the agreement touted by Dias was a commitment by FCA to invest between \$1.35 billion and \$1.5 billion to transform its Windsor assembly plant into a facility capable of building hybrid and electric vehicles. However, the investment is dependent on the federal and Ontario provincial governments providing the automaker with hundreds of millions in subsidies, and on Unifor's complicity in shrinking the workforce at Windsor, at least temporarily, by over 1,000 workers.

At the press conference, Dias boasted that out of the 1,500 workers who were laid off following the elimination of the third shift in Windsor in July, only 425 retained their right to be recalled under the new agreement. On the basis of early retirement plans and other "incentives," FCA and Unifor have combined to persuade or bully the remaining 1,050 to leave. Dias added that even this vastly reduced number of workers will only be recalled sometime in 2023, more than two and a half years from now.

As talks got under way, Dias stated that two new products were needed for the Windsor plant in order to recall the third shift. The tentative agreement sees FCA commit to only one new product after 2023. Nonetheless, Dias argued that the third shift will return because the plant's new production capabilities will enable it to build a range of hybrid and electric vehicles. His bluster about returning the third shift was dampened when he was forced to concede in response to a journalist's question that this would take place only in 2024.

Even this latter pledge must be viewed critically by autoworkers. Dias stated that the Unifor deal with FCA follows the Ford pattern. This means that various early

retirement and buyout mechanisms will be included to force higher-paid legacy workers out of the plants in Windsor and Brampton, and the multi-tier wage system will be further entrenched. This will allow FCA to hire lower-paid second-tier workers if they expand their operations in Windsor in 2024 or flood their plants with temporary part-time (TPT) workers with virtually no rights.

If the agreement follows the Ford deal, it will also presumably permit FCA management to institute the hated alternative work schedule (AWS), which is currently being used in the United States to regularly work production employees for 10 or more hours a day and to compel skilled trades workers at FCA's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant north of Detroit to work 12-hour shifts for seven days in a row. (See: Restore the eight-hour day! Stop the move to 12-hour shifts for skilled trades workers at Michigan FCA plant)

Dias also acknowledged that FCA has the right to revise its investment pledge based on a "market conditions" clause in the agreement. This was the justification employed by General Motors when it reneged on previous commitments and shuttered its Oshawa truck and car assembly plants.

Dias' remarks on the future of the Brampton plant were, if anything, even less reassuring. With some 3,400 workers currently employed at the Toronto area facility, which is operating well below capacity, all the Unifor president could offer were promises for the introduction of three derivative vehicles during the life of the agreement. No production guarantees for the Dodge Challenger, Dodge Charger, and Chrysler 300 sedan, the three models currently built there, exist beyond 2023.

One autoworker wrote in response, "Jerry Dias needs to be out... I think he's getting paid under the table. You guys should all vote no. Nothing for Brampton Assembly, mark my words this will probably be the last 3 years for Brampton." Another added, referring to the prospect of the AWS, "Like Ford contract we will be doing AWS. Which means working 10 hours a day for 4 days and Friday 8 and maybe Saturday."

Unifor also agreed to a significant reduction of workers at FCA's Etobicoke casting facility just outside of Brampton. While 500 were employed there at the beginning of the previous contract, this number has been steadily reduced to just over 100 today. Dias indicated that the return of 80 jobs previously shifted to Brampton could help the Etobicoke facility employ slightly over 200 workers, i.e. less than half as many in 2016, by 2022.

At the press conference, Dias spoke like a corporate consultant or partner offering his services to big business investors. He enthused at the prospect at developing a "national auto strategy" in partnership with the Trudeau Liberal government and the right-wing provincial government of Doug Ford based on state handouts to the corporations to guarantee lucrative shareholder payouts, and Unifor's complicity in reducing wages and benefits. He also advocated the development of a national economic strategy for corporate Canada based on the exploitation of its natural resources and the working class, with the union serving as a police force in plants and other work sites to enforce low wages and block strikes.

But Dias' style is not simply a personal matter. Rather, it expresses the role of Unifor and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole, which is to boost the competitive position of the automakers' Canadian operations by reducing labour costs and increasing the exploitation of the workers that Unifor falsely claims to represent.

Unifor's promotion of Canadian nationalism is aimed at pitting Canadian, US and Mexican autoworkers against each other in a race to the bottom on wages and working conditions. Its pro-capitalist corporatism accepts without question the claim that autoworkers' jobs must be subordinated to investor profit and lavish payouts to corporate CEOs. On this basis, Unifor, its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), and its US counterpart, the United Auto Workers (UAW), have presided over the whipsawing of jobs and benefits back and forth across national borders over the past three decades, while defending the profitability of the auto giants.

Unifor's contempt for autoworkers was shown recently at Ford, where similar promises of major investments were used by Dias to conceal massive attacks on working conditions. The union deliberately suppressed the fact that it had agreed to the AWS until after the ratification vote. It also buried its acceptance of a reduction of the Oakville assembly plant's workforce by over 10 percent within a year in the small print of its "highlights" brochure.

FCA workers should expect Unifor to attempt similar trickery as it seeks to smuggle through the deal in an online ratification vote scheduled for this Sunday. They should decisively reject this by demanding that the agreement be

released in full prior to the ratification vote, and that they be given at least one week to study its details and discuss it with their colleagues. If Unifor refuses these legitimate demands, which have been endorsed by over 1,800 rank-and-file workers in an online petition, FCA workers should automatically vote "no" on the deal.

But a rejection of this sellout is only the first step because Unifor would not come back with anything different. That is why the fight for decent-paying, secure jobs requires the formation of rank-and-file factory committees that are independent of Unifor. These committees should take up workers' key demands, like the rank-and-file safety committee at FCA's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), which is waging a struggle against the imposition of 12-hour shifts on skilled trades workers and dangerous conditions during the pandemic.

The job actions in March by Windsor workers against the spread of COVID-19 helped spark wildcat strikes at struggles at SHAP and other plants in Michigan and Ohio, ultimately forcing the closure of the North American auto industry in mid-March. This was done by the workers themselves, not Unifor or the UAW. Whether it is defending lives or the right to a secure job and a decent living standard, everything depends on the independent initiative of workers themselves.

The rank-and-file committees should also unite autoworkers in a common fight across all of the Detroit Three's operations in Canada and throughout North America. In opposition to the nationalism incited by the unions, their guiding program should be the unification of Canadian, US, and Mexican autoworkers in a counteroffensive against all job cuts and concessions.



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