Canadian autoworkers' union rams through job-cutting agreement with Fiat-Chrysler despite strong worker opposition

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Unifor announced Monday that it has successfully rammed through a three-year agreement at Fiat-Chrysler (FCA) in the face of widespread skepticism and strong opposition among rank-and-file workers. Although the deal was approved by a vote of 78 percent to 22 percent, it was supported by just 59.7 percent of production workers and 57.2 percent of skilled trades at the Brampton Assembly Plant, FCA's second largest Canadian facility.

The overwhelming support for the agreement from workers at the company's Windsor Assembly Plant (86 percent from production and 89 percent from skilled trades respectively) reflected Unifor's touting of a more than billion-dollar investment in the facility that the union claims will secure its future. FCA has pledged to invest between C$1.35 billion and C$1.5 billion to upgrade the Windsor plant to build hybrid and electric vehicles from 2024.

Unifor President Jerry Dias claims the plant's retooling will create up to 2,000 jobs. However, many questions remain about the deal's implementation, and it all depends on FCA securing hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies from the federal Liberal and Ontario Conservative governments, so as to ensure the plant's "global corporate competitiveness"—that is, lavish investor payouts.

FCA's letter of intent to Unifor, which was shared with workers as part of its "highlights" brochure, sums up the uncertainty that remains over the automaker's plans. FCA asserted that any investments would be predicated on "competitive operational practices" and "appropriate government financial support to build a strong viable business case for future investments." The letter then continued by stating that all investments "are subject to the two key conditions in the preceding paragraph and, as always, to market demand, consumer preferences, company business plan requirements, group executive committee approval and economic conditions."

In other words, FCA has a free hand to scale back, delay, or outright cancel its investments for a whole number of reasons. Moreover, in the name of preventing this and boosting "the business case" for the investments to proceed, Unifor could, as it has done in the past, reopen the agreement and impose further concessions. Aside from the obvious references to "market conditions" and "economic conditions," it is worth drawing special attention to the mention of "group executive committee approval." With FCA set to merge with France's PSA Group early next year, a global restructuring plan involving the destruction of thousands of jobs will be rapidly formulated by the auto bosses to eliminate "excess capacity" and "product duplication."

Moreover, the FCA contract, like the deal concluded at Ford Canada, has provisions aimed at pressuring higher-paid legacy workers to retire and contains no protection against a vast expansion of low-paid, temporary part-time labour (TPTs) when the company's operations ramp up in Windsor. FCA and Unifor agreed to offer retirement incentives to 350 workers in early 2021, including 275 production workers and 15 skilled trades in Brampton. This equates to a reduction of the current 3,400-strong workforce in Brampton of more than 8 percent.

Retirement packages have also been boosted to C$60,000 for production workers and C$70,000 for skilled trades throughout the life of the agreement.

Dias touted as many as 2,000 "new jobs" in Windsor four or more years hence. However, his calculations glossed over the fact that the workforce there was cut by 1,500 when the automaker eliminated the third shift last July, and that 425 workers remain on indefinite layoff.

Even if Dias's pledge of 2,000 new jobs in 2024 comes true, by allowing the automakers to systematically expand their use of TPTs and perpetuating the hated multi-tier wage system, under which workers must work a full eight years before reaching full pay, Unifor has ensured that FCA will be able to profit until well into the 2030s from a large low-paid workforce.

Behind the hype about the large investment in Windsor, few details were provided on whether production will continue there at its present level throughout the life of the new agreement. If, for example, FCA decides to cut back production due to poor sales of its minivan models, an even larger number of higher-paid legacy workers could be forced out by the

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combined efforts of FCA and Unifor to make way for low-paid new hires and TPTs.

To secure passage of yet another concessionary contract, Unifor relied on a C$7,250 signing bonus, and modest wage increases of 5 percent over the three-year contract that will see workers' pay stagnate at best when inflation is taken into account. The union's promises of job security, no matter how tenuous and flim-flam, also no doubt had an impact among the Windsor workers under conditions in which millions have lost their jobs across Canada due to the pandemic.

FCA workers who spoke to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* revealed that Unifor and Dias's main concern at the ratification meeting, which was held online due to the pandemic, was to suppress any sign of opposition to the deal from rank-and-file workers. A veteran Windsor worker stated that workers were prevented from asking questions in real-time. Instead, they could only type the questions into the Zoom conference, provided they knew how to use it, and wait for the union bureaucrats to read them out. Predictably enough, a question he submitted criticizing the union was ignored.

Other members asked questions about pension rights, apprenticeship hiring, and the prospect of the alternative work schedule (AWS), which was introduced as part of the "pattern agreement" Unifor forced through at Ford Canada. The AWS does away with the eight-hour day and most overtime pay, and allows management to force workers to perform shifts of up to 12 hours. Unifor officials insisted that the AWS was a Ford-only issue and will not be introduced at FCA. This reassurance should be treated critically, bearing in mind that Unifor, in connivance with the company, hid from workers that it had agreed to AWS's implementation at Ford Canada until the agreement was ratified late last month.

Another worker at Brampton told the *Newsletter* that Unifor officials were extremely concerned about a large "No" vote in the plant. They sought to persuade workers to vote "Yes" by claiming that six-day work weeks would continue at their plant and that more could be secured in the 2023 bargaining round when the Windsor facility has been saved.

Autoworkers also denounced Unifor's pro-corporate strategy in a series of angry comments posted online. A Ford worker attacked Unifor's imposition of major concessions, writing, "Ford lost overtime pay after 8 hours and shifts can be increased to 10.5 hour Mon. to Thurs. plus 10 on Friday and mandatory Saturdays. There will be a loss of thousands of full time jobs. Influx of more TPT's, co-op, and students. 3 tiers of pay, 8 year grow-in. No gains for retirees, vacations, sub, or pensions. 'Historic' according to Jerry [Dias]."

"You're supposed to be for the workers not management," wrote a Windsor FCA worker. "It's the same in both plants. Union sleeping with the management again. When is the union ever going to be for the workers again? Those days are lost. The union needs management so we can keep paying dues for nothing. And management needs the union to force us to do what management wants."

This assessment is entirely accurate. Based on its corporatist, Canadian nationalist perspective, which accepts that workers' jobs and livelihoods must be subordinated to investor profit, Unifor is conniving with the globally mobile automakers and big business federal and provincial governments to restructure the auto industry at workers' expense. Dias's disgusting boasts in the "highlights" brochure about "game-changing investments" and how "Canada has become a forerunner in green cars and green jobs" only goes to show that his principal concerns are the profitability and global "competitiveness" of corporate Canada and his close working relationship with the Trudeau Liberals and Doug Ford's Conservatives.

But these developments are not just a matter of Dias personally. Over the past three decades, Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, and its US counterpart, the United Auto Workers (UAW), have participated in the whip-sawing of jobs and benefits back and forth across national borders in a race to the bottom, and suppressed rank-and-file opposition to plant shutdowns. The most recent example of this in Canada was Unifor's bogus Save Oshawa GM campaign, during which the union suppressed all job action and promoted anti-Mexican chauvinism, before accepting a "closure agreement" that eliminated all but a few hundred jobs.

The attacks on autoworkers imposed by Unifor in the current bargaining round confirm once again that the struggle to defend decent-paying, secure jobs for all must be waged by the workers themselves. They must organize independent rank-and-file committees in the plants to seize control of the remaining bargaining round at GM and take up a fight to overturn all layoffs and other concessions across the Detroit Three's operations. Above all, these committees must unify the struggles of Canadian, American, and Mexican autoworkers into an international worker counter-offensive against the transitional automakers, their big business allies in government, and the pro-company unions' attempts to divide them along national lines and pit them against each other.

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