

CAMI autoworkers should reject Unifor's attempt to reopen contract with GM Canada!

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With the contract for about 2,000 autoworkers at General Motors' CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario set to expire this September, Unifor has called a snap membership meeting on Zoom for this Sunday with the aim of replacing the current contract and ramming through sweeping concessions.

This anti-democratic manoeuvre, cooked up by the Unifor union bureaucrats and their partners in corporate management over the holiday period, is designed to stampede workers behind a sell-out agreement that would be roundly rejected if the details were presented in full and subject to informed debate.

In a bargaining update posted yesterday, Unifor Local 88 announced that they had extended a self-imposed Thursday midnight deadline to reach a deal with GM. It continued: "If a tentative settlement is reached, we will inform the membership as soon as possible. The Zoom Meeting is still scheduled for Sunday January 17, 2021."

In recent weeks, the union's main concern has been to keep workers in the dark about what is going on. In the union's End of Year Report prior to the Christmas break, Local 88 President Joe Graves highlighted the just-completed installation of a new electronic "Simply Voting" system for the membership. "One of the other things with Simply Voting," said Graves, "is if we ever get called in to early bargaining or if we have bargaining, we can use the information that is on there. So, the information will be set up. So, people will then be able to go on for ratification, for strike mandates and all the voting process we do with the COVID."

Plant Chairman Mike van Boekel noted in the same report that the union's Master Bargaining Committee had already assembled. "We are going through all our demands, trying to get ready for a contract in case GM comes knocking early," said Van Boekel. "We want to be prepared. So, I do ask you to take the time, go to the (Simply Voting) icon, whatever it's called, and register to vote because you have to vote already for Triennial elections."

Unifor's claim that it was simply making preparations "in

case GM comes knocking early" is clearly a subterfuge. The union was manifestly already in discussions with management, for no sooner did the New Year begin than Unifor, after what it described as "weeks of preparation and planning meetings over the holidays," began "formal negotiations" with GM on January 4, 2021.

However, it did not officially inform the membership of this fact until it issued its first "bargaining update" on January 11.

By then readers of the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* in the plant were already aware something was in the works. One worker had contacted the *Newsletter* on January 7 to say that the union had taken the decision to reopen the contract. He wrote, "GM has approached Ingersoll Local 88 to open contract early and bargain a new agreement. Local 88 leadership met in secret with company to come up with a new agreement. They let membership know on January 5th that there will be a virtual meeting and vote on January 17th to rush a bad contract through during COVID-19."

Veteran workers of the Detroit Three auto companies in Canada will be well aware of the massive concessions that have traditionally accompanied any move to reopen an agreement in advance of the normal expiration date. In 2008, then Canadian Autoworker (CAW) President Buzz Hargrove secretly advanced the traditional contract negotiation period by some six months in order to ram through massive concession contracts at Ford, General Motors and Chrysler. That deal included language that opened the way for GM to suddenly announce the closure of the Oshawa Truck Plant even before the ink was dry on the settlement.

One year later, Detroit Three contracts in Canada were once again reopened in the wake of the global financial crash. That infamous deal froze autoworkers' wages and cost-of-living allowances until 2012, gave back a week of holidays and a previously negotiated \$1,700 annual bonus, increased health care and insurance premiums, and allowed the companies to increase workload. Retirees had their cost-of-living protection suspended and faced increased co-pays

for health and other benefits. Overall, the new agreement surrendered over \$19 per hour per worker in labour costs—considerably more than did the 2008 sell-out contract, which provided GM with an additional \$400 million in savings.

At CAMI, since the month-long strike of 2017 was sabotaged and led to defeat by Unifor, about 800 jobs have been shaved off the plant rolls as hundreds of veteran workers have retired. In November, it was announced that the third shift would be abandoned beginning in early 2021 for at least a year, in order to fill the vacancies created by the retirements. A method has been worked out to keep most employees working, and to offer an option for about 225 to stay home with a small top-up of benefits.

Traditionally, the concessions made in the round of pattern-bargaining at the Canadian Detroit Three plants held the year before the CAMI contract is negotiated are rolled into any new deal at Ingersoll.

The settlement finalized with GM in Oshawa and St. Catharines last November included an alternative work schedule (AWS). This grants the plant's management authority to organize shifts as they see fit, and eliminates overtime pay for most work on weekends or beyond the traditional eight-hour workday. The bargaining report notes, "(T)he company will have the ability to structure the shift's start and end times to avoid high peak time utility costs." It continues, "The company will maintain the ability to maximum run-time for optimal operating flexibility, inclusive of unpaid lunches (8.5-hour shifts)."

The GM deal also allows the company to outsource materials, general stores and any tool room positions. At least 15 percent of jobs can be low paid temporary part-time (TPT) workers. Despite much ballyhoo about the eventual reopening of assembly production in Oshawa, the contract gives no new product to that facility, only overrun orders from US truck plants and no product commitment beyond 2025.

Van Boekel noted that the 2020 GM deal came "at a steep price. The language is absolutely terrible," he said, "and some of the work rules they put in place. And no doubt GM will try and enforce some of that in our plant as well. But the cost (for the Oshawa jobs) was huge." In other words, Van Boekel is softening up the membership to accept similar sweeping concessions.

To be successful in the coming contract struggle, CAMI workers must review the critical lessons of their determined 2017 strike. As the WSWs explained at the time, it was not defeated due to a lack of militancy among autoworkers, but because Unifor prioritized its corrupt relations with the auto bosses over defending workers' interests, and peddled a reactionary nationalist program that left workers defenceless

against GM's threat to shut the plant down and shift production to Mexico. Summing up the conclusions that workers must draw, we wrote, "First, under conditions where GM, a transnational company with platforms in 31 countries, produces the same Equinox model manufactured at CAMI in Spring Hill, Tennessee and Ramos Arizpe and San Luis Potosi, Mexico, the nationalist program promoted by Unifor left autoworkers defenseless against company threats to move production southward.

"Second, GM's insistence from the outset of negotiations that due to its right of private ownership of the means of auto production it would not bargain on product volumes or locations, shows that only a political fight guided by a socialist program can move the cause of the working class forward.

"Third, such a fight can be waged only in relentless struggle against Unifor and the entire trade union bureaucracy. Autoworkers must break organizationally and politically with Unifor, which has developed a corrupt partnership with the auto bosses and big business. To take their interests forward, workers must build their own independent organizations of struggle to unite the fight to defend jobs and living standards with their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and internationally."

The first step in this struggle for CAMI autoworkers is to break Unifor's stranglehold over the bargaining process by establishing their own rank and file committee in the plant. We encourage all workers who agree with this strategy to contact the *Autoworker Newsletter* today to begin preparations for this crucial struggle.

If Unifor tries to present a new contract for ratification Sunday, there is no way that workers will have time to study it properly before being herded (albeit virtually) into voting booths. All the more so since the union will no doubt provide workers with no more than a phoney "highlights package" designed to present the agreement in the best possible light. Workers should reject this attempt to railroad them into accepting a sell-out contract, vote "No," and demand that they be given at least one week to examine the contents of any future deal in full before a ratification vote is held.



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