

Canadian autoworkers' union rams through concessions-laden deal at CAMI plant after secret talks with GM

Carl Bronski
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Autoworkers at the General Motors CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario ratified a new collective agreement Monday that will see production of the Equinox crossover vehicle phased out by 2023 and the gradual introduction of an electric vehicle capability. The restructuring of the CAMI operation will involve a C\$1 billion cash infusion from GM to jumpstart the company's global move into electric-powered vehicles.

To describe the snap Zoom ratification meeting that the plant's 1,900 workers were ordered to attend Sunday as having anything to do with a democratic vote would be a travesty. In reality, it amounted to a carefully planned ambush of the workforce by the local and national union bureaucracies in collaboration with GM management, and Canada's federal and Ontario governments. Their common goal, which they accomplished through a combination of blackmail, threats, backroom conspiring, and concealment, was to slash GM's labour costs at the plant so the auto giant can rake in bumper profits as it transitions to the production of electric vehicles.

Unifor belatedly admitted in a January 11 update to the workers that it had begun formal talks with GM on reopening the existing contract, which was set to expire in September, on January 4. However, it is likely that behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing was under way for weeks prior to that date, involving Unifor President Jerry Dias, GM management, and federal Liberal and Ontario Progressive Conservative government officials.

At the Zoom meeting, workers learned that Unifor had agreed to give GM a free hand to determine staffing levels and working conditions at the plant. The self-serving contract "Highlights" brochure contained no written details on the impact of the proposed deal on work rules, scheduling, downtime layoffs and ultimate staffing levels.

In order to stampede the membership toward ratification, Plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel and Unifor Local 88 President Joe Graves painted a dire picture of an imminent

"deathblow" to the plant should the workers fail to ratify the tentative agreement.

There would be no guarantee of final employment or production numbers, they told the workers. There would be significant changes to work rules and job classifications. However, a new "Competitive Operating Agreement" with all the details could not yet be announced. Due to an imminent retooling, much of the plant would be idled but the extent and length of layoffs could not yet be predicted. Team sizes would continue to be reduced, they said. Moreover, skilled-trades jobs would ultimately be on the chopping block.

The brochure explained, "The parties acknowledged that there were still many unknowns regarding the new operations." To hedge their bets on final staffing levels, early retirement packages were offered.

The economic part of the settlement mirrored the three-year concessions-laden pattern agreement instituted at all other Detroit Three plants in Canada last autumn. The principal goal of these deals was to force higher-paid, legacy workers out of the plants and open them up to low-wage second-tier and temporary part-time workers, who have virtually no rights. The hated two-tier wage system was consolidated, onerous alternative work schedules were introduced, and overtime pay slashed. In terms of wages, workers received a 5 percent increase over three years, effectively a real-terms pay freeze. A productivity and quality bonus up to \$7,200 and some inflation protection bonuses were also included to sweeten the bitter pill.

Although national union president Jerry Dias told reporters that employment levels at CAMI would ultimately be "comparable" to current numbers once full e-vehicle production was established, GM, as the auto companies always do, reserved the right to manage staffing levels as they see fit. "The parties understand that the expected conditions upon which these opportunities are based can change, potentially affecting the product allocation and/or

employment levels,” the agreement summary noted.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Unifor has presided over a substantial reduction of the workforce at CAMI over recent years. Since the union sabotaged the 2017 strike by inciting Canadian nationalism to divide CAMI workers from their class brothers and sisters in Mexico and the United States, the plant’s workforce has declined by almost one third from 2,800 to 1,900.

Of these 1,900 workers, 1,545 cast a ballot following the ratification meeting. On Monday, Unifor reported that 91 percent of the voting membership acquiesced to the gun placed to their heads by the union bureaucrats. However, the support among skilled trades workers was much lower at just 65 percent. This was no doubt due to the direct threat to skilled-trades jobs contained within the “highlights” brochure.

Unifor’s practice in auto industry negotiations of refusing to present the full contract before voting and providing virtually no time for workers to deliberate amongst themselves has come under bitter membership criticism for many years. But the union’s secret re-opening of an existing contract without saying anything publicly, let alone obtaining a mandate from the workers, and its “pig in a poke” snap ultimatum plumbs new depths in its undemocratic conduct. The union functions as a conspiratorial agency of the bosses and capitalist governments, working to overcome worker opposition to savage attacks on their jobs and living standards.

Anyone who doubts this should consider the enthusiasm in GM’s corporate boardroom, the financial press and the big business federal and Ontario governments for the CAMI deal. Only last week, and with much fanfare, GM CEO Mary Barra announced the launch of its BrightDrop brand of electric commercial delivery van vehicles and associated software solutions. The company plans to invest US\$27 billion by 2023 with a global footprint designed to challenge Ford and Tesla in the e-vehicle marketplace.

A BrightDrop EV600 delivery van model to be produced at the Ingersoll CAMI plant is the first vehicle in this initiative. FedEx has contracted with GM for orders of the EV600 from the CAMI operation beginning in November. More orders from other logistics companies are expected for early 2022. GM’s foray into e-vehicle production in Canada follows on from similar initiatives by Ford in Oakville and Fiat-Chrysler in Windsor, Ontario.

Like those initiatives, the Liberal federal government and the Conservative Ontario government will contribute up to 15 percent of the funding for CAMI’s transition to e-production. Commenting on the CAMI deal, federal Innovation and Industry Minister François-Philippe Champagne promised his government would work with GM

“to quickly get this investment to the finish line.”

GM Canada President Scott Bell, who revealingly referred to Dias and the union’s local plant chairmen as “partners,” noted that the project would also benefit from government relief from provincial electricity costs and municipal industrial taxes. Bell referred approvingly to the Liberals’ Net Zero Accelerator fund, which was established in December. This multi-billion-dollar fund, financed at the public expense, is clearly emerging as yet another slush fund to finance the insatiable appetites of the corporate elite for ever higher profits under the guise of promoting a “green economy.”

The federal and provincial governments are providing well over a billion dollars in subsidies to the Detroit Three automakers—GM, Ford, and Fiat-Chrysler—as part of a union-supported restructuring of the Canadian auto industry aimed at securing its “global competitiveness.” The new contracts will ensure that the industry continues to produce bumper profits for investors through intensified production, job-cutting, brutal shift schedules and a further erosion of workers’ rights and living standards. Invariably, more and more second-tier and temporary part-time workers will populate the shop floors, significantly reducing the auto bosses’ labour costs.

This process of intensified exploitation is not confined to CAMI, GM, or even the auto industry. In fact, the corporatist alliance of the Liberal government, trade unions, and big business, consummated amid the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic last spring, is working tirelessly to restructure large swathes of Canadian industry and manufacturing at the expense of the working class. That is why events at CAMI must be taken as a warning by all workers.

These developments must, sooner rather than later, provoke a renewed outbreak of bitter working class struggles in the auto plants, parts supplier industries, and other economic sectors. To prepare for these battles, workers at CAMI and across Canada’s auto sector must break decisively from the nationalist, pro-corporate Unifor, establish rank-and-file action committees in every plant to fight for the overturning of all concessions, and unify their struggles with their class brothers and sisters across North America in a common fight for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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