

Nexteer Automotive workers in Saginaw, Michigan speak out in advance of UAW contract vote

Our reporters
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Auto parts workers at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan will vote soon on a tentative agreement announced recently by the United Auto Workers Local 699. A first tentative agreement was overwhelming rejected by an 85 percent “No” vote two months earlier.

Workers at the steering components complex have been working without a contract since March 2020, when the previous five-year sellout agreement expired. With the exception of a three-month-long shutdown which began last March, Nexteer workers have been forced to remain on the job in the midst of the pandemic with no new agreement in place.

There is widespread hostility among Nexteer workers to the backroom dealings between the UAW and the company. Their last contract, forced through in 2015-2016 after the UAW called a sham 18-hour strike to allow workers to blow off steam, contained massive concessions. In the aftermath, dozens of workers were victimized and fired by the company.

The UAW is keeping workers in the dark about the current agreement, but workers widely expect another sellout. While the union is planning several contract rollout meetings beginning this weekend, multiple commenters on the Local 699 social media post demanded that the full contract immediately be made available to the membership online.

In the midst of the contract rollout, factional warfare has emerged within the local bureaucracy, who are also up for re-election soon. Last week, union treasurer Rhonda Fritz announced she had uncovered hundreds of thousands of dollars funds misappropriated by then-local leadership between 2013 and 2018. Fritz called for an investigation into their finances.

Workers from the Nexteer complex spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site Auto Workers Newsletter* on Thursday about conditions at the plant, the contract, and their overall general anger brewing at the plant.

“I was here for the 2015 contract,” one worker said. “We

all got sold out. It’s a pattern—they don’t tell you what’s actually in the contract, and they try to get you vote ‘yes’ on it. Once you do, all of a sudden there’s all this other hidden s*** revealed about it.

“The union and the company work together now, so it’s not even like you do anything about it. This struggle has to be taken up independently by the workers, and I think a lot of people feel the same way. If this upcoming contract goes through, I’m dropping my union dues. I definitely need the extra money because we don’t get paid enough.”

Another worker told the WSWWS that while the rollouts are typically held at the local union hall, the union’s most recent posting specified that they were to take place directly on the factory shop floor, where management would be free to overlook and possibly intervene.

“I can’t believe they’re trying to pull this. How can we be expected to ask questions and learn about the contract fairly when the bosses are breathing down our back?”

Another worker said, “The situation is ridiculous. We don’t know what is going on with the contract or anything else really. The bargaining committee keeps us in the dark. They tell us they can’t talk about the contract because they have to honor a ‘hush-hush’ clause. We haven’t had a contract or a raise in a year, and they talk about these ‘hush-hush’ clauses? And meanwhile, the first proposal was a joke. We rejected it.

“We’ve been asking for a strike vote for a long time. The plant shut down in March 2020, and then they brought us back three months later, with no new contract. Our last union meeting was mid-summer of last year. Most of us in that meeting were demanding a strike authorization vote. The union didn’t hold one and we haven’t met since, other than the ‘roll-out’ meeting in February.

“Those of us who were part of the strike in 2015 haven’t forgotten how that went down. We were only on the picket line for about 12 hours before they hustled us off, before anything was really settled. Then we had very little time to

look at that contract before voting. It was like 180 pages long. And it kept the tier system, which pretty much all of us hate. But the company scared all the newer hires, and most of them probably felt they would be fired if they didn't accept it. That's how it passed in 2015. The union basically went along with it.

"We haven't had a new contract in over a year, and meanwhile Nexteer is reporting record profits. We're owed a lot of back pay, and there's rumors that this proposal will try to cap what we're owed.

"Guys are getting sick from COVID. It's definitely underreported at the plant. I've had it, and four guys who worked around me did as well. The company doesn't even give you paid time off if you get it, you have to go on disability. But they make record profits.

"Mainly we're in the dark. The union gives us no updates. They have this five-page-long embezzlement notice, where they're pointing fingers at each other, and probably stealing from our dues. There are members on the bargaining committee who should probably be in jail right now. Everyone's angry about what's going on."

A salaried Nexteer worker said, "I know that my coworkers have been unhappy with the way things are going recently. And honestly, I don't blame them at all. There have been a lot of COVID cases here. At one point we had five or six in a week in my plant."

"They're getting rid of so many people, and they're putting more work on each of us. I've been speaking with people in my department and we've been taking on the responsibilities of multiple plants. We have just been doing everything."

"I have a coworker who tells me she's been working six, sometimes seven days per week. Another colleague of mine got laid off, came back and then the management was farming him out to all the different departments, working on equipment he's not even familiar with. Everything is being done from the standpoint of making more money and paying the CEO more."

A second-generation Saginaw automotive worker told WSWs reporters, "I don't feel great about this contract. It's inevitably going to be pretty lousy. By the current industry's average, we don't make anywhere near what we're supposed to.

"The International [UAW] has stock in GM, Ford and Chrysler, which means their interest is in the company, not the members. Why should they be representing the workers? On a federal level, the UAW execs just got prison time. Not enough prison time, if you ask me."

Referring to the recent announcement of the Local 699 financial scandal, the worker added, "there's nothing stopping something like this from happening again. Maybe

there are some well-meaning people with good intentions who take positions with the union. But they get in there, and because of the situation that they're in, it corrupts them. I think that all these union backroom deals should be made entirely public."

"The greed in America is unreal. Nobody is happy about this situation right now. My father retired out of Grey Iron, another Saginaw manufacturing company, and he thought that we'd be at \$40 per hour. But I'm making \$15.88 right now. The wages were way higher back in the day, and there was less high-tech industry going on. And the cost of living was lower.

"Saginaw really got hit hard by deindustrialization. But even if all the work which got sent overseas were to be brought back in the US, who says the wages for these jobs would be what you need them to be? That's the most important thing, is that we need higher pay. Workers have all the power to shut down industry across the country and the world, but they need authentic leadership—not leadership which is bought and paid for by the company."

"I don't consider myself a socialist, but I like the message that the WSWs is trying to spread and the truth you guys are trying to bring to light."

A veteran worker at the plant explained, "When you look at the situation today, we are going backward and not forward. It's like we have come full circle back to the days before unions even existed and the Robber Barons ruled the world. The same thing is happening again when you look at the extreme levels of wealth at the top."

When asked if he felt the unions were on side of the workers or management, he immediately commented that there is no way to represent the company and the workers at the same time. "The UAW owns stocks in all these companies and there is corruption not only in the international but also national locals. Recently, one of the International representatives commented that they want to have a seat at the table in China (Nexteer is owned by a Chinese company) as well as the United States. How can you look out for the interests of the members and the company?"



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