

Michigan Nexteer workers denounce sellout contract, demand recount after suspicious ratification vote

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After last week's move by United Auto Workers Local 699, backed by Region 1D of the UAW International, to ram through a new round of cost-cutting at Nexteer parts plants located in Saginaw, Michigan, workers have turned to social media and the pages of the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* to denounce the new contract and demand a recount of the highly suspicious ratification vote.

Comments on the UAW Local 699 Facebook page give an indication of the widespread anger among workers and belief that the ratification vote was rigged.

One worker demanded that the union publish the vote total, and his colleague shot back: "Once screwed, always. Do a recount!"

Another worker forwarded a social media post to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, in which he wrote: "I never thought the TA2 would pass. I've worked there for 15 years and it just seems like the contracts are getting worse. This contract is the first one that doesn't guarantee work."

Last Friday night, amid growing anger over both the substance of the new tentative agreement, announced by the union on May 8, and the completely undemocratic and bureaucratic manner in which it was presented to the rank and file, UAW Local 699 posted on its Facebook page a one-sentence statement claiming that the deal had been ratified by a margin of 52-48 percent. This came several hours after voting on the pact had ended.

That was all the information provided by the union executives. No numbers were officially reported, no breakdown of the vote by the skilled trades workers, no breakdown according to different plants and classifications. Nor has the union provided any further information since then.

An unofficial social media post claimed that the skilled trades workers voted down the contract by a margin of 54

percent to 46 percent. It further reported that only 60 percent, or 1,500 out of the 2,500 eligible workers, actually voted. That would mean that less than 30 percent of the workers in the local voted in favor of the agreement.

The procompany five-year agreement, worked out behind the workers' backs between the Hong Kong-based global auto parts maker and the UAW, is the latest round in a running battle between workers in a region that includes Saginaw, Pontiac and Flint, all cornerstones of the once far larger General Motors empire, and the financial oligarchs of today. The previous contract covering the Nexteer workers in Saginaw expired in March of 2020, but the UAW refused to call a strike, even after the workers defeated an initial tentative contract in February of 2021 by a margin of 85-15 percent.

Since the spinoff of GM's parts division more than two decades ago, the wages and conditions of workers who toil at what was once known as GM Saginaw Steering have been destroyed. Most Nexteer workers receive, in real terms, barely half the wages of their predecessors, compounded by mandatory overtime, endless speedup and the increasing use of superexploited part-time and temporary labor to divide the workforce and deprive all workers of economic security.

Now, already hit by the impact of COVID-19 and the refusal to the UAW to enforce any serious safety measures, Nexteer workers are expected to simply accept the "word" of the union executives. But it is the workers—whose labor generates the profits of the multimillionaire company tops and their partners in the UAW—who have to live with the conditions imposed by the deal.

Increasingly across the US—Volvo Truck workers in Virginia, coal miners in Alabama, nurses in

Massachusetts, ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states—and around the world, workers are saying “no” in defiance of the corporatist unions.

A Nexteer skilled tradesman told the WSWS, “My parents met in the plant. Without General Motors I wouldn’t even be here. But they cannot believe what is happening now.”

“The contract is bad news because they can replace all the full-time workers with part-timers, and they don’t have to pay them overtime,” an A shift worker told the *Autoworker Newsletter* Tuesday night.

“A lot of people are calling for a revote,” he continued. “There’s a year and a half in which our wages are frozen, and nobody gets any increase.”

Most, if not all, of the nominal wage increase over five years—leaving most full-time production workers at a poverty wage of less than \$22—will be eaten away by inflation and increased health insurance costs.

“They are cramming it down our throats,” the worker said. “I would support a rank-and-file committee. We have to get something going in the plant.”

Workers in plants and schools in many parts of the US and internationally have responded to the initiative of the WSWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International for the building of a global network of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and the big business parties. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* is urging Nexteer workers to form such a committee and demand a full audit of the ratification vote supervised by representatives of the rank and file, not the UAW.

Nexteer workers, through their own committee, would formulate their own demands, based not on what the company says it can afford but on their own needs. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* suggests that these demands include:

- Restoration of all previous wage cuts and contract concessions, particularly in the 2010 and 2015 contracts.
- The hiring of all temporary and part-time workers as full-time workers at the same wages as all other workers.
- Further expansion of health care coverage at a reduced cost.
- An end to the tier system, the Alternative Work Schedule and Critical Plant Status.

On Saturday, the local ABC TV website reported the ratification of the Nexteer Saginaw contract, citing the union’s “52-48 percent” figure. It quoted UAW Local 699 President Tom Hurst as calling the procompany deal a “victory,” and saying, “I know it’s been a big relief for the bargaining committee and all of the staff at the union.”

The article went on to cite Hurst as saying the local union had agreed to a new schedule of weekly meetings “to restore critical communication between union officials and Nexteer management.”

On March 17, Nexteer issued a press release announcing its financial report for fiscal year 2020, boasting that the company’s second half profits for 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, were 14.1 percent higher than for the same period in 2019. It attributed this to aggressive cost-cutting.

It praised its “team” partners in accomplishing this feat, without directly naming the UAW. But it was the UAW that enforced the back-to-work policy of both Trump and the Democrats and kept workers on the job without a contract for 14 months.

The 2020 financial report indicated the degree to which the company was relying on the UAW to impose a new concessions contract on the Saginaw workers, following their overwhelming rejection of the first TA, which occurred one month before the March 2021 release of the company report. It stated:

“The Company and the UAW continue to work toward a new tentative collective bargaining agreement that is acceptable to the UAW local membership. There can be no assurances that the negotiations with the UAW will be resolved favorably or that the Company will not experience a work stoppage or disruption that could adversely affect the Company’s operating results and financial condition.”

Wall Street and Nexteer’s owners are acutely aware that the workers were potentially in a strong position if they had struck and fought to broaden the strike to wider layers of autoworkers and other sections of the working class. That remains the case today.



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