

# Nexteer workers challenge legitimacy of UAW contract

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On May 21, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 699 posted on its Facebook page a one-sentence statement claiming that a second tentative agreement (TA) for Nexteer auto parts workers in Saginaw, Michigan, had been ratified by the razor thin margin of 52-48 percent.

The announcement was posted only hours after voting ended at the union hall at 8 pm. In the two weeks since then, neither Local 699 nor Region 1-D have released the actual vote count or any other information on the supposed ratification.

Workers instantly demanded a recount. “[O]nce screwed always, do a recount,” wrote one worker on the announcement. “[N]o way this passed. What a crock of s\*\*\*,” wrote another. Many workers on the second shift (2-10 pm) commented that they had not been able to vote. Unofficially, workers were told in a private Facebook group that more than 1,000 of the approximately 2,500 workers did not or could not vote on the contract.

Other workers demanded to know how the votes were counted. “So, it only takes 2 hours to count the votes now? Who counted them, and who verified them?” wrote one worker. “Those are the fastest results I’ve seen in 15 years of working there.”

Other workers expressed anger over being denied access to the full contract before the vote itself. The UAW only released self-serving “highlights” of the five-year deal.

The UAW has remained silent in the face of these questions, demonstrating its contempt for the democratic rights of rank-and-file workers.

After the alleged May 21 ratification, Local 699 President Tom Hurst told the local ABC TV station that the agreement was a “victory,” and then unwittingly spilled the beans on whose victory he was talking about, saying: “I know it’s been a big relief for the bargaining committee and all of the staff at the union.”

Indeed, after Nexteer workers voted down a first Tentative Agreement by 85-15 percent in February, the UAW did

everything to prevent a strike and ram through another pro-company contract. Nexteer workers produce steering columns, shafts and drivelines for five of the top 10 selling vehicles in the US, including the Ford F-150, Dodge Ram and Chevy Silverado pickup trucks, according to the company’s 2020 Annual Results Announcement released in March. Having spent the last year keeping the factories open while the deadly COVID-19 virus killed dozens of autoworkers and infected hundreds if not thousands, the last thing the UAW wanted was a strike that would quickly lead to the shutdown of assembly plants in Flint, Dearborn, Sterling Heights and elsewhere, already being hit by the microchip shortage.

In other words, Nexteer workers had enormous leverage not only over Nexteer but virtually the entire domestic auto industry. If a real struggle were carried out, uniting Nexteer workers with their brothers and sisters at Ford, GM, Stellantis and other companies in the US and beyond, it would have been possible to begin a counter-offensive to overturn decades of UAW-backed concessions for all auto and auto parts workers.

By blocking such a struggle, the UAW demonstrated for the umpteenth time that it is not an organization that fights for autoworkers but a tool of corporate management whose top executives are bribed to do their bidding. UAW Region 1-D Steve Dawes, for example, had a salary of \$204,791 last year, in addition to whatever other perks he gets.

This only underscores the need for Nexteer workers to join the growing number of autoworkers and other workers in building rank-and-file committees, which will give workers the voice and collective organization to really fight. Such committees, which operate independently of the UAW and other unions, have been formed in Stellantis, Faurecia, Volvo Trucks and other factories.

Nothing about this new labor agreement, including how it was “ratified,” is legitimate. One of the first tasks a Nexteer rank-and-file committee would carry out is an investigation into voter fraud, gathering information from witnesses, examining the vote totals, and questioning local and regional

officials. If there is evidence of fraud, the vote should be overturned, and the contract declared null and void.

Workers should advance their own demands for a new contract, including the restoration of wage cuts and contract concessions in 2010 and 2015, a 25 percent raise, the immediate transfer of temporary and part-time workers to full-time status with full pay and benefits and the expansion of fully paid medical benefits. Workers should also fight for the abolition of the multi-tier wage and benefit system, the Alternative Work Schedule and Critical Plant Status and forced overtime.

Most importantly, a rank-and-file committee would take up the functions long abandoned by the UAW: addressing workers' grievances, opposing layoffs, speedup and unsafe conditions and fighting for the shutdown of the plant and full compensation for workers if there are COVID-19 outbreaks.

Predictably, corporate management praised the UAW for ramming through the new deal. "We are pleased that Nexteer management and our United Auto Worker partners have successfully achieved a new collective bargaining agreement," said Dennis Hoeg, vice president and North America Division president of Nexteer Automotive. "The commitment from both parties enabled the teams to overcome many challenges in the past year and to achieve a mutually competitive agreement that builds a strong, sustainable future for our employees and Nexteer."

In fact, the new contract will worsen pay and working conditions. The deal will:

- Keep most production workers at near-poverty wages through 2026, when most production workers will max out at \$21.50/hour, if they are able to even hang on to their jobs;
- Further increase the burden of health care costs for most workers, and restrict access for those who opt for cheaper care;
- Enlarge the pool of highly exploited temporary and part-time workers, and maintain the hated tier system;
- Keep in place the "Alternative Work Schedule" and "Critical Plant Status, obliterating the concept of the eight-hour workday and driving workers into an endless cycle of forced overtime;
- Cede "management flexibility" on all critical issues to company for future changes in the contract, with the only proviso that they be done "jointly" with the pro-company UAW leadership.

The actual 230-page contract was never officially posted by Local 699, unlike the first TA that was roundly rejected. Instead, the full second TA was posted by a private Facebook group "Saginaw unions no holds bar."

The same Facebook group, unofficially administered by UAW and other aspiring union bureaucrats, censored posts of articles by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. These

articles informed workers of the actual content of the contract, quoting what workers were saying, and urged them to vote down the sellout contract and build a rank-and-file committee independent of the union.

### **The way forward for Nexteer workers: Build an independent rank-and-file committee**

Despite the coordinated efforts of the UAW and the company to keep workers in the plant isolated, the reality is that the anger of Nexteer workers is part of a broader opposition emerging among key sections of workers in the auto, mining, steel and other industries.

On Sunday, June 6, approximately 3,000 Volvo truck workers in Virginia will vote on another sellout contract proposal after rejecting a virtually identical offer by 91 percent three weeks ago. Workers at the plant have formed a rank-and-file committee and have issued a series of statements outlining the real demands of workers at the plant.

In Alabama, 1,100 coal miners are now in the second month of a strike against Warrior Met, after rejecting a second sellout contract prepared by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). These developments are part of a global upsurge of strikes among workers, including thousands of autoworkers at major plants in India owned by companies such as Ford, Hyundai, Renault-Nissan, and others just this past week.

To fight global corporations, a new strategy and organizations are needed, ones which strive for the international unity of the working class. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*, issued a call on May Day 2021 for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). A rank-and-file committee at Nexteer would be a critical component of such a global network of workers' organizations.

We urge workers at Nexteer who wish to find out more about starting a committee to contact us today.



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