

# After resounding contract rejection: The way forward for Detroit Diesel workers

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*Are you a Detroit Diesel worker? Contact us to let us know why you voted down the deal and what you want in the contract.*

Tuesday's overwhelming 79 percent rejection of a sellout contract at Detroit Diesel is a courageous stand by 1,300 workers at the plant. The engine manufacturing workers refused to accept a deal that would have whittled their wages and standard of living down to the bone.

That the United Auto Workers even brought this deal to a vote was an insult to workers' intelligence. The proposed agreement contained an 8 percent cumulative wage increase over the six-year life of the contract, which means a massive cut in real wages.

At the current rate of inflation of 8.3 percent, every dollar a worker brings home will be worth approximately 40 percent less by the end of 2028. The deal also maintains the hated two-tier wage structure, cuts benefits and contains an absurdly long six-year wage progression. This is only a third less than the nine-year progression the UAW signed in the last deal.

By standing up to the UAW, workers rejected not only massive givebacks. They are also implicitly challenging the entire pro-corporate "labor-management" structure that produced this deal. Detroit Diesel workers have taken a stand for workers everywhere, including the 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers whose contracts expire 16 months from now in September 2023.

In the course of the vote, workers have been furious over how their 98 percent vote to authorize a strike has been ignored by the United Auto Workers International and UAW Local 163 officials. Workers were even told by local union officials at informational meetings that the union would not call a strike even if the deal was voted down.

What right do these people have to defy the democratic decision of workers? In making such statements, the UAW demonstrates that it does not represent the interests of workers but those of management.

But what the UAW wants to do is one thing. What will *actually* happen will depend upon what workers do. Detroit

Diesel workers, if they fight to unite with their brothers and sisters throughout the auto and truck-making industry, are far more powerful than the handful of bought-off UAW functionaries who are trying to impose the company's demands.

The rejection of this sellout deal is only the first step. It would be a serious mistake to believe that rank-and-file pressure alone will compel Local 163 President Mark "Gibby" Gibson and others to relent and organize a fight for a better deal. Over the past year, the UAW responded to overwhelming "No" votes at John Deere, Volvo Trucks and Dana Inc. by regrouping and forcing workers to vote again on the same contract.

Even if the UAW feels compelled by rank-and-file pressure to call a strike, the strategy of UAW President Ray Curry, who got his start in the 1990s selling out Freightliner workers in North Carolina, would be to try and use the strike as a weapon not against management but against workers. Even as the UAW sits on a strike fund paid for with workers' dues, which is worth nearly \$800 million, Curry & Co. would try to starve workers out with poverty-level strike pay and force them to accept the same contract they just voted down.

To bring their power to bear, Detroit Diesel workers need the organizational means and a strategy to fight against UAW sabotage and take control of the fight into their own hands. They must act themselves, independent of and in opposition to the UAW bureaucracy.

Therefore, workers in the plant should move quickly to found a Detroit Diesel Workers' Rank-and-File Committee. Such a committee, composed of and controlled democratically by workers themselves, would begin from what workers need and want, not from what crumbs Detroit Diesel is prepared to give. Expanded to include representatives of shifts and departments throughout the plant, the committee will emerge as a center of workers' power.

Workers should join the committee to fight for the following strategy:

**First**, the committee should demand the calling of a strike. Workers voted almost unanimously to strike and have now rejected the company's tentative agreement with contempt. There is no legitimate reason to keep workers on the job. No contract, no work! Workers must demand that the UAW set a deadline for a strike as soon as possible.

Once a strike begins, workers must be adequately provisioned. The UAW, meanwhile, will attempt to soften up workers on the picket line by forcing them to subsist on \$275 per week in strike pay, with payments beginning only on the 15th day of the strike. Workers should demand the full resources of the UAW's \$800 million strike fund, paid for out of workers' dues money, be made available to strikers, with \$750 per week in strike pay beginning on the first day of a walkout.

**Second**, rank-and-file workers must exercise control over the bargaining process. The rejection of the contract—which the Local 163 bargaining committee hailed as a great deal—is decisive as a vote of no confidence in the bargaining committee. They must immediately resign and be replaced by representatives elected from the rank and file.

The process of “negotiations” behind closed doors must be brought to an end. Any talks which take place in private, behind workers' backs, are not “negotiations” but a conspiracy of the union and management against workers. All future talks must be livestreamed on the internet and made available to the entire workforce.

As these measures are being taken, workers inside the plant should communicate and draw up a list of their own “red lines,” without which they will not ratify any agreement. We recommend that these demands include:

- Monthly cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) fully indexed to inflation and added to the base wage;
- A 40 percent raise to catch up with inflation and make up for decades of UAW-backed concessions and wage stagnation;
- Fully paid medical, with no deductibles and co-pays;
- A three-year maximum contract;
- Workers' control over health and safety, including the right to refuse to work in case of a coronavirus outbreak; and
- Restoration of full pensions and retiree health care for all classes of workers.

**Third**, the committee should reach out and establish lines of communication with workers all across the industry. Contrary to what the UAW would have workers believe, they are not isolated. They are located in Detroit, a major center of the global auto industry. Tens of thousands of their brothers and sisters work in assembly parts plants throughout the area, in conditions which are just as bad or even worse than at Detroit Diesel. Seven-day, 80-hour workweeks are common, and the UAW is actively covering

up COVID-19 cases, even as the virus continues to spread and kill workers in the factories. They would respond to a Detroit Diesel strike with great enthusiasm.

Moreover, Detroit Diesel workers should appeal for support across the country, including at agricultural equipment manufacturer CNH, where more than 1,000 workers are on strike, and in the heavy truck industry, including at Freightliner, Daimler Trucks and Volvo Trucks. Workers at the Volvo Trucks plant in Virginia, who founded their own rank-and-file committee last year in the midst of a strike which the UAW sold out, would not only enthusiastically support Detroit Diesel workers but also serve as an important source of advice and information.

The strategy of the UAW and Detroit Diesel hinges upon isolating workers and convincing them that they have no choice but to accept concessions. The strategy of the rank-and-file committee, meanwhile, will be based on the unification of Detroit Diesel workers with their brothers and sisters around the world, including at Daimler and Mercedes Benz, who are already beginning to fight back.

Strikes are already underway at critical workplaces such as by nurses at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, the most important hospital in Los Angeles. Workers have been on strike for two weeks at the farm equipment manufacturer CNH (owned by the same billionaire family, the Agnellis, who are the largest shareholders of Stellantis) which has also pit them against the UAW. Workers there have also founded a rank-and-file committee of their own. In Sri Lanka, an island country off the south coast of India, millions have taken part in strikes and demonstrations against runaway inflation, forcing the resignation of the prime minister.

Detroit Diesel workers are in an immensely powerful position. But for their struggle to succeed they must establish their own independence and act on the possibilities that exist.

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