

Ventra Evert workers vote to strike by 98 percent

George Kirby
15 July 2022

Work at Ventra or Flex-N-Gate? Fill out the form at the end and tell us what you think workers should be fighting for, and what conditions are like at your workplace.

Workers at the Ventra Evert auto parts plant in central Michigan voted by 98 percent to authorize strike action on Thursday.

The massive show of determination to win higher wages and better working conditions comes nearly three weeks after workers overwhelmingly rejected a United Auto Workers-backed contract proposal, which was defeated by 95 percent on June 27. The deal, which had been unanimously endorsed by the UAW bargaining team, included below-inflation raises totaling \$2.50 an hour over five years, while raising workers health care costs.

Ventra is owned by Flex-N-Gate, one of the top producers of auto parts globally, with 26,000 employees across 69 facilities worldwide. The company produces bumpers, lights and other components, supplying the Detroit Three automakers and Tesla.

The powerful strike authorization vote comes in the face of attempts by the UAW bureaucracy to browbeat workers into accepting the company's demands and to prevent a walkout.

In the run-up to the contract vote in late June, UAW International Rep. Dan Kosheba told workers at a union meeting they would not achieve higher wages than the company was offering because "you're not Big Three." The meeting erupted in anger when the UAW cut the mic on a worker criticizing working conditions.

After the Ventra deal was rejected, the UAW announced it had agreed to keep workers on the job under a day-to-day contract extension past the June 30 expiration of the previous agreement. The union also

agreed to a 72-hour waiting period before any walkout would begin, and delayed holding a strike authorization vote until Thursday.

While workers want to seize the opportunity and fight to break out of poverty wages and poor working conditions, there can be no doubt that the UAW executives are seeking to block a struggle and force through a repackaged version of the company's demands.

Closed-door talks have continued with management since the contract rejection. "Why are they so secret about the negotiations?" one worker told the WSWS. "Adam Spayth, our union rep, was at his house, with management's HR rep. Why would you meet in private in your home? I know why: It's the same reason why they're never at work. Everyone should hear the negotiations."

On Wednesday, the Ventra Evert Workers Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement demanding that a deadline for a walkout be set following the strike authorization vote, writing that further delay "only gives the company a greater advantage."

The statement demanded that contract talks be placed under the oversight of rank-and-file workers, with all negotiations livestreamed. The committee also called for Ventra workers to reach out and appeal to workers throughout Flex-N-Gate and at the Big Three, in order to mobilize support for a common struggle for better wages and working conditions.

The strike vote at Ventra is part of a growing mood of rebellion in the auto plants industry, which has found expression in an increasing number of decisive rejections of UAW-backed contracts.

In nearby Greenville, Michigan, nearly 230 workers at Tenneco twice voted down UAW pro-company contracts over the past month. Tenneco Powertrain,

formerly Federal Mogul, produces bearings and other parts for the auto industry.

In June and July, Tenneco workers in Greenville voted down contracts by 95 and then 79 percent. In the first agreement that was voted down, Tier 2 and skilled trades workers topped out with a \$2.50 raise by the fourth year of the contract, and Tier 1 workers only received a \$1.20 raise. With annual inflation increasing now to 9.1 percent, the contract would amount to a pay cut, not to mention the increase in health care costs.

Ventra Evart workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* denounced the UAW's delay tactics. "They said we vote then it goes to International for approval," a production worker stated. "It's stalling."

Asked if there was sentiment for a walkout, the worker continued, "Yes, they want it. Sooner, rather than later. They are working us seven days and flooding the plant with temps.

"Everybody is burned out over this hogwash. They want something done; we're not letting up."

Like many in the parts sector, Ventra workers work in sweatshop conditions for poverty pay, the product of decades of collusion between the UAW, the Big Three and the parts companies to drive down workers' wages, benefits and conditions in the plants. Just before the first contract vote, a worker was seriously injured after a 30,000-pound die fell on him. In 2018, a worker at the plant, Robin Wilkins-Yazdani died after a pipe dropped on her head. More recently, at Ventra's Grand Rapids, Michigan plant, Moses Kur was crushed by machinery and killed in December 2021.

The UAW has been particularly concerned to prevent strikes at parts producers in recent years, given the shortages plaguing the auto industry and the vulnerability of "just-in-time" supply chains to work stoppages at parts plants. Serving as enforcers of "labor discipline" on behalf of the corporations, the union bureaucracy is terrified that a walkout by parts workers would quickly find support throughout the auto industry and spark a widespread uprising.

Workers at GM Subsystems, a subsidiary of General Motors, were kept on the job by the UAW 14 months after their contract expired. The UAW brought back a last-minute agreement shortly before the strike deadline. UAW Vice President for GM Terry Dittes sent out letters to GM assembly workers to cross the picket line in the event of a strike. Like tentative

agreements at parts plants, low-wage tier workers were strong-armed into accepting the contract with front-loaded bonuses and raises, while pay topped out at \$22 an hour for production workers after six years.

While the struggle at Ventra has been completely blacked out by the UAW International and the corporate media, it has received strong expressions of support from Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker who is running for UAW International president.

"The huge strike authorization vote and the earlier contract rejection at Ventra Evart, as well as the similar votes at Tenneco, are extremely important developments," Lehman told the WSWS Friday. "It shows once again that workers are fed up with being told by the UAW bureaucracy that they have to accept less and less, year after year, so that the corporations can make even bigger profits.

"My campaign stands in solidarity with the Ventra Evart Workers Rank-and-File Committee. I encourage autoworkers and workers everywhere to follow their example, to get together and draw up your own demands, to form communication networks within and across the plants, and to build up new organizations controlled by workers ourselves."

To contact the Ventra Evart Workers Rank-and-File Committee and discuss getting involved, text 231-335-7049 or email ventrarfc@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact