

UAW pushes Daimler/Freightliner contract reopening to impose 3-year contract extension

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On Tuesday afternoon, a United Auto Worker (UAW) bargaining committee memo landed like a bombshell on the shop floors at Daimler/Freightliner Truck plants in Gaston County, North Carolina. The union's bargaining committee is proposing to move swiftly to reopen the current contract, which is not scheduled to expire until April of 2024, in order to impose a three-year contract extension chock-full of changes demanded by the corporation.

The Daimler Truck Bargaining Council begins the memo saying it “would like to inform the membership that the company has approached us about opening the contract early to talk about a possible extension.” Without addressing any of the burning questions affecting rank-and-file workers, the council continues, “The company wants to address, economic and operational issues. Not a full negotiation.” (Underline in the original).

It concludes, “The locals will be holding a special meeting and a membership vote in the following weeks to determine whether to enter into discussions with the company or not.” The memo does not say what the company's economic and operational demands are. It does bear the signature of each of the council's 12 members.

Workers are justifiably wary about reopening the contract. The UAW's record in relation to previous reopenings has always seen massive concessions. It is likely the UAW is offering the company a years-long extension, which would include a no-strike clause and lower labor costs, based on bogus promises of future investment.

Last year, the UAW granted Daimler Truck-owned

Detroit Diesel a one-year extension before imposing a concessionary contract on workers earlier this year. In December 2021, the UAW reopened the contract at Freightliner competitor Navistar and extended the contract, which was due to expire in 2024, until 2026. The deal included a miserable 4 percent raise in 2024, well below the rate of inflation.

“Everybody I talk to about the bargaining committee paper is saying, ‘No,’” a worker on the day shift at the Gastonia plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*. Others expressed deep suspicion and anger toward the union bureaucracy. “We know they are in each other's pockets. They have never done anything for me,” a coworker added.

This afternoon, another worker described the spreading opposition on the shop floor, “People are not happy. Seems like the word about the negotiation date change is what everyone is talking about yesterday and today.”

Among workers there is a widespread sense that they must fight for a substantial increase in wages, given the persistently high inflation rate, but no one believes the UAW apparatus intends to do anything that would negatively impact the company's bottom line. On the contrary, the UAW bureaucracy has enforced near-sweatshop conditions in the North Carolina plants.

“I work in the most difficult, frustrating, dangerous area in the entire plant,” another worker said, “and they expect us to keep up with production numbers and write us up if we don't get them. The union does nothing about that! It's ridiculous!”

His coworker added, “My machine has been leaking hydraulic fluid for months, look back there ... they just put down a freaking soak pad. Look at this maintenance log on here, all of the x's are uncleared fault codes or undone maintenance.” He went on to describe similar

conditions in the entire area. “You know how it is, run it till it grinds to a halt. The maintenance guys are awesome, but the company apparently doesn’t let them do preventive maintenance. The supervisors don’t care. They just want you working, no matter if your machine is broken down.”

The conditions are not only frustrating, but also extremely dangerous. “The man who runs that machine has been out for a few weeks,” a colleague explained. “The company did not fix the clamps on his set-up. He crushed his finger as a direct result and almost lost it.”

“The company has no preventive maintenance program. Around here, it’s run until it quits. No matter how bad your machine runs and causes you to ruin parts,” another co-worker added and cited the growing hostility for the UAW apparatus. “I got wrote up over that BS, and my union rep did nothing about it. The reps in here do nothing but sit on their butts in their office and ignore the phone when it rings. They even lock the door when they’re inside so you think they’re not there.”

Others joined the discussion to denounce the conditions in the shop. “I was hired as a brake press set-up specialist, and they put me in here without any training.” Another added, “The supervisor didn’t even talk to me. If it wasn’t for friendly coworkers that noticed I needed help, I still wouldn’t know what to do. That is a joke of a training program.”

Workers reported backwardness and abuse of every stripe. “The supervisor tried to fire me for no reason,” reported an African-American employee. “I called my union rep and he said to stay on my job, but that is what I was doing. I didn’t ruin parts or anything. That’s racism, and I am now out of work with PTSD and mental issues because of it.”

The UAW has long sought to break up the unity of heavy truck workers by signing contracts with different expiration dates at Navistar, Freightliner, Volvo Trucks, Mack Trucks, Peterbilt and other manufacturers. In this way, they help the truck manufacturers pit workers against each other in a competitive race to the bottom.

The UAW agreed to contract reopenings in 2009 at GM and Chrysler and colluded with the auto bosses and the Obama administration in the halving of wages, the abolition of the eight-hour day, the expansion of temp work and the destruction of thousands of jobs. When

Ford demanded similar concessions, the UAW granted them, including ending cost-of-living adjustments (COLA). At the time, UAW officials also claimed they were only addressing “economic” and “operational” issues, not renegotiating the whole contract.

The most classic example of a devastating contract reopening took place 43 years ago when Chrysler Corporation reopened its agreement in a restructuring engineered by the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter, with the assistance of the UAW under President Douglas Fraser. Plant closings, massive layoffs, and huge cuts to wages and benefits were imposed. The event represented a turning point in class relations and signaled the beginning of four decades of social counterrevolution, in which the jobs and living standards of the working class were sacrificed in order to boost corporate profits internationally.

As part of the deal in 1980, UAW President Fraser was brought onto Chrysler’s board of directors and expanded the corporatist program of union-management collaboration, which has culminated in the full transformation of the UAW apparatus into a direct arm of corporate management.

The ever-deeper integration of the UAW bureaucracy into the structures of management has continued into the present. Current UAW President Ray Curry is a member of the Board of Supervisors of Daimler Truck AG, the Germany-based parent company of Freightliner. Curry began his career at the Freightliner plant in Mount Holly, North Carolina, and his ascent to the top of the union bureaucracy was marked by the imposition of a series of punishing concessions contracts at the Daimler plants. A potential factor in Daimler’s rush to reopen the contract is the possibility that Curry will prove unable to retain his seat in the ongoing UAW national elections.

Freightliner workers should oppose the reopening of the contract and take up the call by Mack Trucks worker and UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman to build rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor.



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