

Canadian and US autoworkers must fight together in upcoming contract battle

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The WSWS strongly urges all autoworkers at the Detroit Three's plants in Canada to contact us here or fill out the form below to discuss the building of a rank-and-file committee at your plant ahead of the September contract expiration.

The global auto companies, including the Detroit Three in Canada and the United States, are waging a major onslaught on the workers who labour in their factories. Canadian and American autoworkers must seize the opportunity presented by the upcoming contract expirations on both sides of the border to unite in a powerful, internationally coordinated struggle against General Motors, Stellantis and Ford.

For the first time since 1999, workers in Canada and the US will fight for new contracts at the same time. On September 14, contracts covering 150,000 United Auto Workers (UAW) members at the Detroit Three companies will expire. Four days later, contracts with the same employers expire for 18,000 Unifor workers in Canada.

The stakes for autoworkers on both sides of the border are high. The auto bosses are waging a relentless global assault to reduce labour costs and slash jobs in order to dominate the markets and technologies for electric vehicles (EVs). Extensive plans have already been prepared to fund the transition to EVs while maintaining their enormous corporate profits by further suppressing wages, shredding what remains of protections against forced overtime, increasing production quotas and obliterating standard work rules.

In order to meet this threat, autoworkers in the United States have begun to form their own rank-and-file committees independent of the UAW bureaucracy that has presided over decades of concessions contracts, all the while gorging themselves on bribes and kickbacks from the corporations.

A statement by autoworkers is already being circulated in auto plants across the American Midwest. It declares, "To ensure this opportunity is seized and results in a clear victory for workers, we call for the formation of rank-and-file committees at every factory, warehouse and workplace. An industry-wide network of such committees will provide the necessary organizational framework for a coordinated, unified fight by all workers for higher wages and decent working conditions and will prepare the ground for an international strike by Ford, GM and Stellantis workers across North

America."

Workers in the Canadian plants must join this initiative. After all, the statements now emanating from Unifor President Lana Payne and her lieutenants in the union executive make it clear that these bureaucrats, who have for decades aided the corporations by pitting American workers against their Canadian brothers and sisters in a never-ending race to the bottom, will intensify the promotion of poisonous Canadian nationalism to divide workers during the 2023 contract battle.

Since the reactionary split by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) from the UAW in 1985, the union bureaucracies on both sides of the border have spewed reactionary nationalism to divide workers and justify their partnership with the auto corporations. Continually offering give-backs on wages, benefits and working conditions, the UAW and CAW, which became part of Unifor at its founding in 2013, compete in a relentless "whip-sawing" of contract concessions back and forth across the border. However, the enemies of US and Canadian autoworkers are not each other or the workers in Mexico, Asia, Europe or anywhere else, but the global auto corporations and the giant banks and financial institutions which are attacking workers all over the world.

Rather than an initiative toward international solidarity, Unifor's push to have the Canadian and American contracts expire simultaneously marked an escalation of this nationalist and corporatist strategy. During the 2020 bargaining round, now-disgraced former Unifor President Jerry Dias successfully argued for a three-year deal rather than the traditional four-year contract. He argued that the shorter contract was necessary so that Canadian and American contracts would expire at the same time, putting Unifor in a better position to compete with the UAW for investments by the auto corporations.

Whatever the calculations of the Unifor bureaucracy may be, autoworkers on both sides of the border should grab the opportunity with both hands presented by the joint expiration of their contracts to build a unified North America-wide movement to secure their demands.

Addressing the fact that both Canadian and American auto contracts are coming up at the same time, Dave Cassidy, Unifor Local 444 president for Windsor Stellantis workers, spoke for the entire leadership when he told reporters earlier this year that

the union's whip-saw strategy will continue. For the Unifor apparatus, it's not the corporations that are the enemy, it's autoworkers in the United States. "We're both going in at the same time," said Cassidy. "The fact of the matter is that if it comes down to product, I can play nice in the sandbox right until the facts come that it's between us and the UAW, then the gloves go off."

In a recent visit to the Stellantis assembly plant in Brampton, Ontario, Payne went out of her way to reassure Mark Stewart, the company's chief operating officer for North America, that Unifor has no intention of leveraging the historic opportunity for a joint North America-wide fight against the restructuring plans of the Detroit Three.

Posing with Stewart and trading jokes like old friends, Payne was keen to assure him that Unifor's role as a reliable junior partner of the corporations and key backer of the pro-war, pro-austerity federal Liberal government would continue. "Unifor has its own job to do," she said, ignoring the international dynamics that inform the global strategy of the transnational auto companies. "We have our own members to represent. We have a different situation in Canada and we're going to chart our own course in this bargaining," Payne declared. This was music to Stewart's ears. "We're excited," he said, "to continue our great working relationship."

But what exactly is this "great working relationship?"

Beginning in 2024, Stellantis will retool the Brampton plant in preparation for a new, flexible architecture allowing for EV and hybrid vehicle production. Most of the workers in the plant will be laid off for the better part of a year. Yet Stellantis has withheld all information on most product commitments that will be made for the eventual restart. An electric Jeep model has been mentioned, but that will only employ a small percentage of laid-off workers.

Auto executives are salivating at the prospect of a 40 percent reduction in workers needed to produce electric vehicles. Additionally, as the changeover to full EV production at the GM CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, has already shown, lengthy layoffs and paltry "income supplements" have driven many autoworkers to rely on food banks to feed their families. By refusing to announce additional product allocations for Brampton, management seeks to hold a hammer over upcoming contract negotiations. Like GM and Ford, Stellantis insists that the expensive changeover to EV production—even with massive government handouts—must be paid for by an inferior wage settlement, lengthy layoffs, speed-up and further work rule concessions.

In the United States, apologists for the deeply hated UAW have sought to contrast the shameless toadying of Unifor with that of the recently ensconced "reform" leadership in the US union. The UAW's new President Shawn Fain, they insist, is ready for a "war" against the Detroit Three. They cite his refusal to participate in the traditional "handshake" with company bargaining officials.

But Fain's remarks about fighting "corporate greed" are nothing but the stock in trade of union bureaucrats seeking to head off any independent movement of autoworkers that might break out of their control. Workers have already noted that Fain has been a long-time loyal hand-raiser for every concessions contract since he was elevated to a high-salaried position as a top staffer at national headquarters a decade ago.

Workers on both sides of the border should also review Fain's naked betrayal of a militant strike by UAW members at the Clarios, Ohio, battery plant shortly after he ascended to the union presidency. Twice workers voted down miserable contract proposals, while the UAW worked to isolate the strike and ordered its various locals to handle scab-produced batteries destined for assembly operations. Abandoned by the union, workers felt they had little choice but to finally accept yet another rotten deal.

US autoworkers who have formed their own rank-and-file committees independent of and in opposition to the UAW bureaucracy have put forth their own set of demands in the upcoming contract struggle.

- **Not a single layoff or plant closure!** Developments in automation and technology must be deployed to shorten the workweek, not throw workers out of a job and increase profits. If EVs require fewer labor hours to build, then the workweek should be reduced from the exhausting 40, 50 and even 60 hours workers routinely labor to 30 hours a week with no loss in pay and the work divided among all workers.

- **A 40 percent general wage increase and the restoration of COLA** (cost-of-living) raises, to make up for years of wage freezes and the havoc caused by high inflation.

- **An end to all tiers and "progression" wage schemes** by immediately bringing up lower tiers to top pay and benefits.

- **The transfer of all temporary and part-time workers** to full-time status, with full pay and benefits.

- **Full funding of pensions and high-quality healthcare** for all current workers and retirees.

- **The reestablishment of the eight-hour day** with wages that allow us to provide for ourselves and our families.

- **Rank-and-file control over line speed and production standards**, to be negotiated by local rank-and-file committees, to ensure that workers' health and safety comes first.

We strongly urge all autoworkers at the Detroit Three's plants in Canada who agree with these demands to fill out the form below to discuss the building of a rank-and-file committee at your plant.



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