

Unifor targeting Ford in Detroit Three auto talks, seeks to divide Canadian and US workers

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14 August 2023

Talks between Unifor and the heads of the Detroit Three auto companies in Canada—Ford, GM and Stellantis (Chrysler)—for new contracts covering some 18,000 autoworkers officially opened August 10 at the Sheraton Centre in downtown Toronto.

Unifor President Lana Payne posed with auto executives from each company and at a subsequent press conference outlined in very vague terms what she called workers' demands for better pensions, wages and job security amid the transition to electric vehicle production. As has been the norm for decades, rank-and-file workers in fact had little, if any, real say in the formulation of the union's bargaining objectives.

While Payne did not make a firm commitment, she announced that the union is currently planning to target Ford to set the pattern with GM and Stellantis for new three-year contracts. Ford currently employs 3,400 hourly workers at its assembly plant in Oakville, Ontario, and 1,710 hourly workers at two engine plants in Windsor, Ontario. Ford announced in April that it would begin retooling the Oakville plant for electric vehicle (EV) production in the second quarter of 2024, idling production until late 2024.

Payne made clear that Ford was the target, not out of antagonism, but because the Unifor leadership has particularly friendly relations with company management. "Ford has been the most forthcoming with us on their plans. They have also been the most transparent, during our quarterly review business meetings," she said. "They've also demonstrated, quite frankly, a willingness to dialogue, and, in fact, they have publicly signalled their desire to draw a blueprint for the future transition, through bargaining, with Unifor. Our union has had a good, historical working relationship with Ford Motor Company."

Autoworkers should take Payne's full-throated defence of the union bureaucracy's corporatist relationship with Ford and the other major automakers as a warning. For the past four decades, the "working relationship" between the auto bosses and Unifor, and its Canadian Auto Workers predecessor, has involved the destruction of tens of thousands of auto jobs. Wages, benefits, and other conditions have been gutted, and plants closed.

The anti-worker corporatism has been no less pronounced south of the border in the US, where the United Auto Workers' leadership has been engulfed in a massive corruption scandal. The UAW, like its Canadian counterparts, was complicit in the slashing of wages for new hires, the introduction of multi-tier wage regimes, and massive concessions on wages and benefits. The union bureaucracies on both sides of the border have based their lucrative corporatist ties with the automakers' on virulent Canadian and American nationalism, pitting autoworkers against each other in a race to the bottom on wages and conditions.

Payne's hailing of this record can only mean that the Unifor bureaucracy intends to continue this onslaught in the latest bargaining round as it competes head-to-head with the UAW for investments. She went out of her way to make clear that the union is working to divide Canadian and US autoworkers, despite the near simultaneous expiration of the Detroit Three contracts—on September 14 in the US and September 18 in Canada—and the common assault on the jobs and wages of workers on both sides of the border. "Unifor charts its own course in bargaining," she declared.

The media has sought to present the new leaderships of the UAW and Unifor, which are drawn from individuals with long careers in their respective bureaucracies, as representing a new wave of militancy. Both union bureaucracies recently emerged from corruption scandals which saw the ouster of their presidents and are deeply discredited in the eyes of rank-and-file workers by their acceptance of years of deep concessions.

Seeking to get ahead of seething worker opposition in the US, UAW President Shawn Fain has struck a more militant posture than Payne. This included refusing to shake hands with company executives at the formal opening of contract talks and plagiarizing the demands put forward by a developing network of rank-and-file committees that is seeking to overturn the union bureaucracy and place power in the hands of workers on the shop floor.

Payne met with Fain at a summit in Windsor, Ontario at the beginning of this month to provide each union with the veneer of international solidarity, while exchanging notes on their

separate national strategies.

If, for the first time in decades, there is a near common expiry date for the Canadian and US Detroit Three contracts, it is not because Unifor is trying to organize a joint struggle. Rather, former President Jerry Dias, Payne's disgraced predecessor, pushed for a three-year contract instead of the traditional four-year deal in 2020, arguing that it would better position Unifor to vie with the UAW in securing Detroit Three production placements.

With the contracts in Canada set to expire in just over a month, strike authorization votes have been scheduled for August 26 and 27. "I made it very clear to the companies today that our members' expectations are very high," Payne stated in her opening remarks.

Autoworkers are determined to win significant increases in wages and benefits along with the elimination of tiers and a reduction in the time it takes to reach top pay, which is currently eight years. Workers across Canada have seen their living standards dramatically eroded over the last several years by surging inflation, particularly in the cost of food, transportation and housing, fueling militant struggles for significant wage increases across industries and among private and public sector workers alike.

A strike by autoworkers could serve as the spearhead for a broader working class offensive against austerity, wage cuts, and attacks on workers' rights. Sellout tentative agreements backed by Unifor as "generous" have been recently rejected by workers at Metro grocery stores in the Greater Toronto Area and at Windsor Salt.

7,200 dockworkers in British Columbia struck for 13 days in July for better wages, against contracting out, and for protection against automation before being sold out by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The ILWU bureaucracy, prioritizing its corporatist ties with the shipping bosses and government, bowed before the Trudeau government's intervention to crush the strike and kept Canadian workers sealed off from dockworkers in the same union in the US.

And 1,400 workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario struck for 41 days, building a rank-and-file committee in a determined struggle against an ultimate betrayal of their fight for better pay and safety by the United Steelworkers apparatus.

While pretending to voice workers' demands and expectations, what Payne did not say is that the Unifor bureaucracy has no intention of waging a genuine struggle to realize them. The interests of the union bureaucracy and the demands and needs of autoworkers stand diametrically opposed. The union will use the misnamed "negotiations" to work closely with the auto bosses and the federal Liberal government to enforce contracts which are favourable to the companies while shoring up their dues base in the auto industry.

Payne demanded in relation to the transition to EV production that these remain "good, union job[s]—with the same rights and employment terms as autoworkers enjoy today," saying nothing about the number of jobs and the level of pay.

It is well known that the auto companies plan to use the retooling of plants to eliminate jobs and press for wage cuts in their cut-throat drive to increase profitability. In fact, Payne admitted that the companies intend for a bloodletting across the industry, telling reporters, "There is no doubt that there is a possibility that we may see some differences in employment," with up to a third of auto parts workers losing their jobs.

In the face of repeated questions, Payne conceded that there would be significant downtime during retoolings at Ford Oakville and also at Stellantis assembly plants in Windsor and Brampton. She said the union would seek to win top-up payments for laid off workers forced onto Employment Insurance while they are out of work. She made no mention of the miserable experience overseen by Unifor at GM'S CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, where workers have had to turn to foodbanks to make ends meet during retooling.

The opening of the 2023 contract talks makes clear that autoworkers at the Detroit Three are on a collision course, not only with the companies, but also with the Unifor bureaucracy. In order to win their demands autoworkers in Canada must take the initiative into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees in every plant. They must seize the opportunity presented by the joint expiration of contracts to link up with their brothers and sisters in the United States and Mexico through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and wage a joint struggle against the auto companies, which are raking in billions of dollars in profits off their labor.

A defiant stand by autoworkers across North America would be met with a powerful response throughout the working class amid what is already the largest strike wave in decades across the continent. All those who are ready to take up this fight can contact the WSWs by filling out the form at the bottom of this article.



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