

Lear auto parts workers vote to authorize strike: “The first contract proposal was an insult”

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Workers at the Lear Seating plant in Hammond, Indiana, voted on Monday and Tuesday to authorize a strike against the auto parts manufacturer by an overwhelming 94 percent margin. Workers are determined to win a clear victory at Lear, which saw record sales in the last quarter, and are fighting for major wage increases, cost-of-living raises to protect against inflation, supplemental unemployment benefits, a good retirement, and more.

The strike authorization vote comes after workers decisively rejected a contract proposal by 95 percent on August 6 that was backed by United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2335 officials and the UAW International.

The rebellion by workers at Lear against yet another pro-company UAW deal takes place amid a growing mood of militancy throughout the auto industry in advance of next month's contract expirations at the Detroit Three. UAW contracts with General Motors, Ford and Stellantis covering 150,000 workers in the US expire on September 14, and for another 18,000 workers in Canada on September 18.

The deal pushed by the UAW apparatus generated substantial anger and opposition among workers. “The first contract proposal was an insult,” one worker told the WSW. “No pension. No profit sharing. No healthcare for when we eventually retire. No COLA. Wages are not keeping up with inflation. Higher premiums.”

The struggle at Lear is being intensely watched by workers at the nearby Ford Chicago Assembly Plant, which Lear Hammond supplies, as well as by workers at other auto plants.

A Ford Chicago worker, wishing to convey his solidarity to Lear workers, told the WSW, “See you on the picket line. Stay strong, you're not in this fight alone.”

He added, “Read the entire contract before voting on anything.”

The contract Lear workers rejected on August 6 would have raised the minimum starting pay from \$15.50 per hour to just \$17 per hour, a poverty wage that is below the rate of many fast-food restaurant chains. The starting rate of \$17 an hour would have

remained the same through the end of the five-year agreement, meaning that new hires in 2028 would still have received just \$17 per hour.

Meanwhile, workers at the current top rate of \$24.44 would have received a raise of just \$2.56, over the first four years of the contract, an increase of roughly 10 percent and well below the current rate of inflation. Workers at top rate would have received only a lump sum bonus in the final year of the contract.

In addition, the contract included major increases to weekly healthcare premiums, deductibles and co-pays, which would have significantly eaten up the already inadequate wage increases. For workers insuring family members, deductibles would have risen over 25 percent, from \$750 to \$950, making any given medical emergency a potential financial catastrophe. Weekly premiums would also have risen more than 20 percent over the life of the contract.

Moreover, the proposed agreement contained a clause allowing the contract to automatically renew annually, unless the company or UAW indicated in writing 60 days prior their intent to renegotiate. In 2022, the UAW agreed to extend the previous contract by one year under a similar clause.

The UAW bureaucracy has kept workers on the job past the August 11 contract expiration this year, agreeing to a two-week extension behind the backs of the rank and file.

There is already ample indication that the UAW apparatus will respond to the strike authorization vote not by waging a struggle to meet workers' needs, but instead by seeking to ram through the original deal with only cosmetic changes, as it did in 2018.

Local UAW officials reportedly resumed official contract talks with Lear on Tuesday. In an interview with the *Northwest Indiana Times*, UAW Local 2335 President Fausto Rodriguez made clear his concern is getting an agreement passed that is suitable to the company and avoiding any shutdown to production, arrogantly dismissing workers' objections to the last tentative agreement.

When asked about the overwhelming rejection of the previous deal, Rodriguez said, “You think you have a great contract, and you have it thrown back at you by quite a majority of the members. You need to work on it again and get it right.”

When the UAW says that they will “work on it again and get it right” they mean they will prepare another virtually identical agreement and call another round of voting until workers vote the

“right” way. “We’ll go back and negotiate as many times as it takes,” he said.

Later in the interview when speaking to the demand from workers for a guaranteed cost of living adjustment (COLA) so that wages keep up with inflation, Rodriguez claimed workers simply don’t know what they’re talking about. “There’s been a lot of misinformation about the cost-of-living adjustments,” he said. “Some people don’t understand how it works and think they’re losing out on big money.”

Later, adopting a tone of “workers just don’t know how good they have it,” Rodriguez said, “Some of the newer workers have never experienced it with no air conditioning and have no recollection of what that was like.”

On Wednesday, Rodriguez declared his intention to bring back another contract for ratification on August 20 in comments to the *NWI Times*.

A second Lear worker who spoke with the WSWs expressed disgust with Rodriguez’s comments, saying, “The interview with Fausto was a joke.”

The worker noted that a UAW International official had attempted to browbeat workers into accepting the contract during the ratification meeting on August 6 with threats to workers’ jobs. “The International guy supported this crap. He even stood up there and told everyone we don’t want to bid ourselves out of a job cause other places out there can build our seats. I’m sure Lear told him that. Every contract they pull that.”

The labor of workers at the Hammond Lear plant is directly tied to that of autoworkers at other companies. The seats produced by workers in Hammond are shipped to the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant, where they are installed into Ford Explorers and Lincoln Aviators. Due to the “just-in-time” system of production, a strike at Lear would swiftly freeze production at the Chicago Ford factory.

In 2020 workers at the Hammond plant carried out two wildcat strikes to protest the spread of COVID-19. These shutdowns immediately caused delays at Ford. Prior in 2018 Lear workers voted down two UAW-backed contracts before a virtually identical agreement was rammed through by a margin of less than 1 percent.

A third Lear worker was similarly dissatisfied with the proposed contract, saying, “At Lear we should be receiving profit sharing checks because cars cannot be sold without our parts. They take our vacation time that we have earned and force us to use it during their summer shutdowns. The company should be paying for that shutdown. We should be able to keep all of our vacation.”

The worker continued, “We should be receiving sub pay [supplemental unemployment benefits] as well and we don’t. We need pension pay. We don’t get to earn sick days or any paid time off.” He felt that workers need “Better medical benefits. More pay.”

Stating his opposition to the tier system the worker said, “They claim we are supposed to be one plant, but they still have a sub [subassembly] to JIT [just-in-time] pay and they are paying some people more money than others. Everyone should be getting a bonus, not just one group of people. We need better 401K benefits. It would be nice to receive a cost-of-living check like others, but

we don’t. Management has a 4 percent increase for cost-of-living but the workers who make the company don’t. Why is that?”

The actions of the UAW bureaucracy at Lear, like the UAW’s sellout of the 40-day strike by Clarion battery workers earlier this year, explodes the claims by new UAW President Shawn Fain to be implementing “transparency” and democratic “reforms” in the UAW. Local 2335 only distributed selective “highlights” of the contract proposal immediately before the ratification vote on August 6, hoping to stampede workers into a “yes” vote.

Fain and the UAW International, meanwhile, have issued no public statements on workers’ rejection of their deal at Lear, seeking to keep other workers in the dark about it.

For workers to see real improvements to their conditions, a massive pay increase is needed. Workers have seen prices at the grocery store, rents and gas prices all skyrocket while wages have remained stagnant or had their real value decline over successive contracts.

Lear, for its part, recently announced record sales of \$6 billion from just May to July of this year. Moreover, Lear workers’ labor contributes to the massive profits which go to investors at Ford and other automakers. There is more than enough money available to pay Lear workers a wage that guarantees a high standard of living.

With the UAW bureaucracy working hand in hand with Lear and the other auto companies, the only way to develop the offensive is for workers to organize their own rank-and-file committees and assert control over the situation. Such a committee would allow workers to draw up a list of demands based on what they need, not on what the company and the union say is acceptable.

Workers at Lear should link up with the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network and join the growing movement of workers preparing a counteroffensive of the working class.



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