

Lear workers reject second UAW-backed contract, as battle with Big Three automakers nears

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20 August 2023

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Auto parts workers at the Lear plant in Hammond, Indiana on Sunday voted down a second contract backed by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy that would maintain poverty wages for the nearly 1,000 workers at the plant. The workers, who produce seats for Ford vehicles at the nearby Chicago Assembly Plant, rejected the deal by 75 percent.

Earlier last week, workers cast a near-unanimous vote to authorize the UAW to call a strike, which would quickly shut down production at the Ford plant. The previous contract had been due to expire August 11 at midnight, but UAW Local 2335 officials unilaterally announced a two-week extension and later a snap vote on a supposedly new deal on Sunday.

Two weeks ago, workers voted by 95 percent to reject the first UAW-endorsed agreement, which would have raised the minimum starting pay from \$15.50 per hour to only just \$17 per hour, less than what many local fast-food restaurants offer. Workers at the current top rate of \$24.44 would get a raise of just \$2.56 over the first four years of the contract, with a lump sum bonus in the fifth year. The roughly 10 percent increase—with no cost-of-living allowances (COLA)—is well below the current rate of inflation. To add insult to injury, the meager pay increase would have been more than eaten up by 20-25 percent increases in healthcare premiums, deductibles and co-pays.

“They just moved the numbers around in the second offer,” one worker told the WSW, adding that her co-workers “were just saying it’s a joke.” Another Lear worker commented on Facebook that the second deal was “worse than the first one.”

In voting down the deal, Lear workers defied UAW local and International officials. During the first ratification vote, International officials tried to blackmail workers into voting for the deal by saying another rejection would lead Ford to look for another seat supplier and imperil their jobs. UAW officials

have repeatedly attempted to stampede workers into accepting the deal, only providing limited “highlights” of the contract immediately prior to ratification votes.

The stand taken by the Lear workers—the latest in a series of overwhelming rejections of UAW-backed deals over the last few years, including at Volvo Trucks, Deere, Dana, Clarios and other companies—is a measure of the mass discontent of auto and auto parts workers in the face of record high living expenses and decades of pro-company contracts pushed by the UAW bureaucracy. It takes place as 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the US and another 20,000 in Canada prepare for a major battle as their contracts expire in little more than three weeks.

The role of the UAW bureaucracy at Lear proves that UAW President Shawn Fain is not fighting for what he claims.

Confronting a rebellion by the rank and file, Fain has released a list of “members’ demands,” including 40 percent pay increases, an end to all tiers, cost of living protections, and company-paid pensions and retiree health care benefits for second-tier workers, which he has no intention of fighting for.

Instead, the Fain-led UAW bureaucracy is looking for a deal with the Biden administration that will protect the financial and institutional interests of the UAW apparatus while it collaborates in the destruction of the jobs and wages of tens of thousands of autoworkers, as part of the transition to electric vehicle production.

This was underscored by the “Solidarity Sunday” rally held at the UAW Region 1 headquarters yesterday in suburban Detroit, which included US Representative Haley Stevens (Democrat) as one of the keynote speakers. As a member of President Obama’s Auto Task Force in 2009, Stevens oversaw the cutting of new-hires’ wages in half, the elimination of COLA, massive job cuts, and the shredding of income security for laid off workers. In exchange for the UAW bureaucracy’s collaboration, the Obama administration handed it billions of dollars in GM and Chrysler shares and control over the retiree health care trust fund.

“I was standing with you during the Great Recession, when they were counting Michigan out, when they were counting the

auto industry out,” Stevens said. “The autoworkers stood up. You made the concessions then and you have rebuilt this industry.” Now, she added, “we have another great transition. But the deal is, my friends, we are not transitioning anything without the UAW.”

Haley’s remarks make clear the Biden administration is counting on the UAW bureaucracy to suppress opposition to mass job cuts and poverty wages.

If the UAW apparatus is unable to do so, Biden and both big business parties are preparing to use anti-strike measures. Several of the supposed “friends of labor” at the UAW rally, including Stevens and Democratic US Senator Debbie Stabenow, voted to ban a strike by 110,000 railroad workers last year and impose a contract that the workers previously rejected.

In his remarks at Sunday’s rally, Fain blustered about fighting the “millionaires” and “corporate class,” without advancing any strategy for workers to do so.

“I assure you we have a plan,” Fain said, adding that it would be revealed “as events unfold.” Right now, he insisted, the rank and file had to maintain “discipline,” i.e., to not question or challenge the legitimacy of the UAW bureaucracy.

Although workers have begun voting to authorize a strike, all Fain said about a potential walkout is that “we don’t want a strike.” He told workers to have faith in the UAW negotiators, boasting that this was his “fifth round of negotiations,” without mentioning his role in backing one concessionary contract after another, including in 2009, devastating the lives of UAW members.

Rank-and-file autoworkers must make preparations now to prevent the sabotage of their struggle by the UAW apparatus and oppose the inevitable sellout that it is preparing. This means expanding the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, which is fighting to transfer power from the UAW bureaucracy to the workers on the shop floor.

In a statement outlining how autoworkers can win their demands, the WSWS explained that the preparation for a real fight required an increase in strike pay to \$750 a week, detailed reports and rank-and-file oversight of all negotiations, and the preparation of an all-out strike across the auto industry on September 15.

“We need to know everything that is going on”

The WSWS spoke with a young supplemental employee from the Stellantis Jeep plant in Toledo, Ohio. He said: “We are voting on August 22 to authorize a strike. We want to give them hell and make it clear we are not going to accept another crap contract. When SEs roll over to full time, you take a pay cut. You could be making \$25 an hour for seven years, and they

cut you to \$15.78. We want to keep our pay when we roll over, pensions, COLA and everything we lost.”

Commenting of Fain, he said, “It’s good that at least we get updates. But everything is very vague. We need to know everything that is going on. Anything that goes on between the company and the union, we need to know about. How does it benefit the company, the union, and the rank and file?”

“The union doesn’t tell us anything. I was one of those that didn’t even know there was an national election for UAW officers. Management has got workers doing three peoples’ jobs and the union doesn’t say anything.”

Speaking of when COVID first hit the plant in March 2020, he said, “My dad has asthma, and I was scared. The nurse who helped my grandma died of COVID. I was crying in my vehicle every day before work, hoping I wouldn’t bring it home. The company and the union were saying, ‘It’s fine, just wear the mask and keep working.’ It took workers going on wildcat strike, without union authorization, to shut the plant and protect people.

“We have a lot to hope for in this contract. We want to get what we want, but we have to worry. We have great power, but with that we have great responsibility and have to think our actions out.”

A skilled trades worker from the Warren Truck plant told the WSWS, “I work five days at the GM Tech Center and seven days at Stellantis. I’m sleeping in my car. Everyone in my family has seen their hours cut and I have to work this schedule to survive.

“I used to hear from my uncles how good it was to work in Big Three auto plants. I grew up poor, but they were able to have vacations, summer cabins and send their kids to college. Now, you can hardly live.

“There was an outbreak of Legionnaires disease and management and the UAW did not say a word.

“When I saw Fain running off to see Biden, I posted a question on the UAW Facebook page asking why. Biden attacked the railroad workers and he wants to do the same to us. The UAW officials didn’t reply to my question.”



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