

UAW announces deal that continues second-tier poverty wages for Ultium battery workers

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Join the weekly autoworkers rank-and-file online forum on the 2023 Detroit Three-UAW contract fight, Sundays at 3 p.m. Eastern. Register here to attend.

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After pledging that autoworkers at the Ultium Cells plant near Youngstown, Ohio, would be part of the national agreement between the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Detroit Three automakers, the UAW announced late Thursday that they have worked out a separate deal with the company that would reportedly set wages for workers at the plant to just over \$20 an hour.

Currently the starting wage at the plant is only \$16.50 an hour, and workers have reported that the turnover rate is 50 percent. According to the UAW, the deal would raise wages \$3-4 an hour.

While the UAW is promoting this agreement as a “breakthrough” and a “victory,” it will set a new poverty standard for all the EV battery operations. In fact, the nearly 1,200 autoworkers at the plant will be earning less than two-thirds of the already depressed wages of their counterparts at the Detroit Three (Ford, GM and Stellantis) and just a few dollars an hour more than what most people working at fast food restaurants or convenience stores earn.

The announcement of the deal at Ultium comes as anger and opposition are mounting quickly among 150,000 UAW members at the Detroit Three in advance of their September 14 UAW contract expirations. On Friday, the UAW announced that Detroit Three workers had voted by 97 percent to authorize a strike, a sign of the overwhelming determination of autoworkers to reverse the decades of concessions granted by the UAW bureaucracy to the corporations.

In addition to low wages, workers at the Ultium plant have reported to the *World Socialist Web Site* horrendous conditions at the plant, including working around hazardous chemicals without proper training or protective equipment; abusive treatment by management; and irregular work schedules, varying between seven-day workweeks and frequent early dismissals due to parts shortages.

The company and the union are seeking to push through the deal without a full contract being signed. A vote by the membership is set for Sunday. Workers are being pressured into voting for the contract with the promise that the pay raise will be retroactive, meaning some workers will receive bonuses of \$3,000 or more.

Workers at Ultium should vote “no” on Sunday and reject the UAW bureaucracy’s poverty-wage deal. No faith can be placed in the claims of Fain and other UAW officials that they will fight for higher wages at some undetermined point in the future. The UAW under Fain sold out the 40-day strike of Clarios lead-acid battery workers in Ohio earlier this year, forcing them to vote repeatedly on a contract with an insulting 3 percent raise, which opened the door to 12-hour workdays.

For workers at Ultium to be able to conduct a struggle for far higher wages, benefits, and safe working conditions, rank-and-file committees of workers on the shop floor are needed. A rank-and-file committee at Ultium would provide workers with a means to draw up a list of their own demands and link up their struggle with workers throughout the auto and auto parts industries.

In a move to save face, UAW President Shawn Fain is calling this an “interim agreement” and pledging that the UAW will still work to get a full contract.

The “interim agreement” again makes clear that the UAW bureaucracy is willing to accept substandard wages and benefits for workers at the EV battery plants, despite its earlier claims that it was seeking to bring these workers under the Detroit Three’s national contracts.

The UAW stated it is still negotiating with Ultium Cells over health and safety contract language, which it says is expected soon. Such provisions have little to do with safety and more to do with setting up corporatist “joint” labor-management programs, which provide a lucrative source of additional income and privileges for union bureaucrats.

Ultium Cells is a joint venture between General Motors and LG Energy Solutions to produce batteries for GM’s electric vehicles produced in North America. In addition to the plant in Lordstown, Ohio, which started full production earlier this year, the company is building plants in Spring Hill, Tennessee and Lansing, Michigan. The Spring Hill plant is set to begin production later this year, and the Lansing plant is supposed to come online in the fall of 2024.

Last year, General Motors announced that it had reached an agreement with the UAW that the company would not oppose the unionization of workers at the Lordstown Ultium plant. Far from seeing the UAW bureaucracy as an adversary, GM’s management understood that it is an essential partner in managing workers. The UAW has in essence promised GM a more stable and disciplined low-paid workforce in exchange for the dues checkoff.

Both Ford and GM have now set up joint ventures to produce batteries for their line of electric vehicles. UAW President Shawn Fain has repeatedly attacked the joint ventures as a means of the automakers avoiding the UAW's national contracts. In videos with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and other Democratic Party politicians, Fain has claimed that the UAW is fighting for wages and benefits at the battery plants to be "on par" with those at the Detroit Three plants.

"That type of (pay) scale is setting our members back 10 or 15 years," Fain said during an Automotive Press Association fireside chat, according to the *Detroit News*. "Hell, so 10 or 15 years later, if we make gains we're back to where we are now. That's unacceptable."

In fact, the deal agreed to by the UAW sets workers back 20 or 30 years.

The UAW-Ultium Cells agreement indicates that the UAW is going to work with the automakers to establish yet another tier of low-wage workers to assist the automakers in their transition to electronic vehicles. The UAW's declaration that it is seeking comparable wages and benefits is in fact a smokescreen for its main objective, which is to establish its presence at the new EV plants and expand its dues revenue.

The use of the UAW bureaucracy to oversee poverty wages and dangerous working conditions at the EV plants is an essential part of the Biden administration's domestic and foreign policy strategy. Biden has continued and escalated Trump's trade war measures, aimed primarily against China, but also against its so-called allies in Europe, in order to secure domination of the EV market through low-cost production. The Biden administration is also pushing hard to control and secure sources for lithium and the other materials that make up battery production.

In line with the nationalist and chauvinist policy of the UAW bureaucracy and to pit American workers against their class brother and sisters overseas, the UAW and General Motors agreed that the union would not represent the hundreds of Korean workers that also work at the Lordstown plant. Most of those workers labor under even worse conditions. They could be described as indentured servants, facing deportation if they quit or are fired.

The deal is also a warning to the 150,000 autoworkers whose contracts expires September 14 that the union plans to continue the hated tier system and suppress wages and benefits for all workers.

The announced UAW-Ultium agreement comes just days after Ultium Cells said that the cleanup of a chemical spill that happened on Sunday is complete and that battery production has resumed.

On Sunday, a pipeline carrying a highly toxic mix of chemicals, referred to as slurry, ruptured, pouring the highly poisonous substance onto the floor and around equipment in the mixing area of the plant.

The slurry contained n-Methylpyrrolidone (NMP), a toxin that the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) classifies as an "unreasonable risk" to human health. The EPA does not list a safe level of exposure to the chemical.

N-Methylpyrrolidone (NMP) is a chemical substance that is commonly used in paint and coating removal products, automotive products, inks, degreasers and more. Overexposure to NMP can

irritate the eyes, skin, nose and throat and can also affect the central nervous system or brain, causing symptoms of drunkenness similar to the effects of drinking alcohol.

NMP is linked to fetal developmental problems, including low birth weight and birth defects, and affects fertility in both men and women. The final risk evaluation for NMP determined that there are unreasonable risks to workers and consumers for 26 out of 37 conditions of use.

This is the latest in a string of accidents that have plagued the plant since its opening last year.

Since the opening, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has cited the Ultium Cells plant in Lordstown, Ohio 12 times, including seven so far this year, for numerous violations that endanger the health and safety of its workers.

The scope and regularity of the infractions indicate a complete lack of concern for the safety of the workers at the plant.

Many of the violations, like the most recent incident, involve exposure of workers to hazardous materials that are extremely toxic in low doses.

Several of the violations include the improper control of power to equipment, particularly the failure to first de-energize the equipment during maintenance, which could lead to a worker being electrocuted or crushed while performing his or her duties.

Other violations include blocking building exits which are needed in case of a fire, explosion or other emergency.

The UAW has claimed it is fighting for "protections" at Ultium, such as joint union-management bodies, that are similar to those in place at the Detroit Three plants. But such corporatist bodies do little more than whitewash corporate disregard for workers' health and safety, as evidenced most starkly in the UAW's role in keeping workers on the job during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For workers to have genuine control over their working conditions and oversight over health and safety measures, organizational structures comprised of and led by the workers themselves are required.

The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network is building a network of rank-and-file committees of autoworkers at every plant to mobilize the full strength of the working class against the collaboration of the UAW bureaucracy with the companies to fight for decent wages, benefits and working conditions. We invite all Ultium Cell workers, both American and Korean, to contact us by filling out the form below and join this fight.

*The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network and the World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter are hosting an online meeting Sunday, August 27, at 3:00 p.m. Eastern/2:00 p.m. Central. The meeting will review the latest developments in the Detroit Three-United Auto Workers contract talks and outline the strategy for rank-and-file workers to fight for their demands. **Register for the event here.***



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