

Canadian Detroit 3 autoworkers overwhelmingly authorize strike when contracts expire in three weeks

Niles Niemuth
28 August 2023

The WSWS calls on all autoworkers at the Detroit Three 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 18 contract expiration.

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

Sign up for text message updates on the Detroit Three contract fight by texting AUTO to (866) 847-1086.

Autoworkers in Canada at Ford, GM and Stellantis voted by 98.6 percent Sunday to authorize strike action when their contracts expire three weeks hence on September 18. According to Unifor—which represents 18,000 workers covered by the so-called pattern contracts with the Detroit Three—workers at Ford Canada voted by 98.9 percent to approve a strike, at GM by 99 percent and Stellantis by 98.1 percent.

Ford workers voting Sunday at the Unifor Local 707 union hall in Oakville, Ontario, who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* were enthusiastic about the strike vote and expressed their determination to oppose all further concessions and win real improvements in pay and working conditions for the first time in decades. Approximately 3,400 hourly workers who are members of Unifor currently work at the Ford Oakville Assembly Plant, where they manufacture the Ford Edge and Lincoln Nautilus.

The Oakville plant is expected to undergo shutdown and retooling for EV production in the second quarter of 2024 and will be idled until the end of next year. During this time workers will have to rely on Employment Insurance, and as the experience at the

GM CAMI plant shows, many—especially the significant number of temporary and low-tier workers—will be forced to turn to food banks and charity to scrape by while they wait without any aid from the union apparatus.

The overwhelming strike authorization is an expression of the anger and militancy of autoworkers who are determined to reverse decades of concessions amid a cost of living crisis. In Ontario, where the Canadian auto industry is concentrated, and across the country, inflation has surged dramatically eroding living standards over the past three years.

The Canadian autoworkers' vote comes on the heels of the 97 percent strike vote by United Auto Workers (UAW) members across the United States, where Detroit Three workers face the same exploitative conditions as their co-workers in Canada.

The contracts for workers on both sides of the border are expiring nearly simultaneously for the first time since 1999, with 150,000 American autoworkers in strike position as of September 14.

This common expiration presents an enormous opportunity for autoworkers to unite across North America to wage a powerful united struggle against the auto bosses. However, at the official opening of talks on August 10 in Toronto, Unifor President Lana Payne made clear that the union bureaucracy is seeking to block such a struggle, declaring, “Unifor charts its own course in bargaining.” The nationalist union apparatus sees the overlapping contracts—a timing arranged by the disgraced former President Jerry Dias—as a means of better competing with the UAW for investments, that is, for whipsawing workers against each other to the benefit of the “Canadian auto industry.”

Canadian workers must reject this nationalist poison and build-rank-and-file committees in coordination with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This will enable them to oppose the ruinous nationalist-corporatist course being pursued by both Unifor and the UAW, and to forge connections with and develop a common struggle with their brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and beyond. A growing network of such committees has already emerged at US auto plants, and among other sections of workers in Canada and overseas.

In every country where they operate, the Detroit Three and the other global auto companies are waging a fierce campaign against their workforces, from the assembly plants to parts suppliers, to maximize profits as they transition from traditional internal combustion engine vehicles to electric vehicles (EVs). The latter require significantly fewer parts and less labor time to produce, and the auto giants are seeking to exploit this to extort new concessions.

They are pitting workers against each other, country by country, as they retool and seek to drive down labor costs, as at Ford in Germany and Spain. They are also extracting massive public subsidies to underwrite their profits, like the C\$30 billion the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal and the Ontario Conservative governments have pledged to Stellantis and Volkswagen to construct EV battery plants in Ontario, and the up to US \$30 billion in battery production subsidies enacted by the Biden administration under last year's Inflation Reduction Act.

The Unifor bureaucracy has been an enthusiastic partner of the auto companies, demanding that the government give them however much they demand, under the guise of saving "Canadian jobs." This nationalist-corporatist partnership was made clear by Payne when she announced that the union is planning to target Ford to set the pattern for the Detroit Three contracts, not out of antagonism, but because the Unifor apparatus has, of the three companies, the best relations with Ford management.

As has long been Unifor's practice, it is refusing to spell out its specific demands, confining itself to generalities, such as seeking "substantial" pay increases. It has refused to commit to abolishing multi-tier pay and benefits and to end the automakers' widespread practice of "temporary employees,"

because the Unifor bureaucrats know Ford, GM and Stellantis view access to cheap labour as critical to their squeezing more profits from workers. Currently, more than 2,200 of Unifor's 18,000 members at the Detroit Three, or close to 12.5 percent, are temporary workers.

The company-friendly stance taken by Payne contrasts with the militant posturing that the new UAW President, Sean Fain, has adopted with the aimed of forestalling an all-out rebellion by rank-and-file workers. But both union presidents and their apparatuses have been working in close coordination on their separate national strategies for getting workers to accept contracts which make them pay the price for the transition to EVs. Fain has also been closely coordinating behind the scenes with the Biden administration, which banned a railroad strike last year. It can be certain that Payne is similarly getting her orders from the Trudeau government, which has long boasted about its "partnership" with Unifor. No less hostile to the working class than Biden, the Trudeau government intervened aggressively last month to shut down the British Columbia dockworkers strike.

A serious struggle by autoworkers to win what they deserve will pit them against not only the auto bosses but the Unifor bureaucracy and a Liberal government, which is being propped up by the union-backed NDP. This makes the building of independent rank and file committees in every factory ahead of the contract expiration critical, so workers can take the struggle in their own hands. These committees will provide workers with a means to advance their own interests: to break the veil of secrecy with which Unifor, in collaboration with the auto bosses, seeks to envelope the negotiations, and to link up with and mobilize support from autoworkers across the border and around the world. Contact the WSWs today to discuss the building of a rank-and-file committee at your plant.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)