

Unifor maintains information blackout as strike deadlines approach for Canadian and US autoworkers

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11 September 2023

Join the next online meeting of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to discuss the latest developments in the contract fight and the rank-and-file strategy for workers to win their demands. Register here to attend.

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With strike deadlines for 18,000 Detroit Three autoworkers in Canada and 150,000 in the US looming, the Unifor bureaucracy is maintaining an information blackout. Stellantis (Chrysler), GM and Ford workers are being kept entirely in the dark about the state of the so-called negotiations.

The contracts for workers on both sides of the border are expiring nearly simultaneously for the first time since 1999, placing them in an objectively powerful position to wage a united struggle against the Detroit Three automakers. Members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US voted by 97 percent last month to authorize a strike when their contracts expire Thursday evening, while workers in Canada who belong to Unifor voted by nearly 99 percent for strike action after their contracts expire on Monday, September 18.

Autoworkers in Canada are closely following developments in the US and are hoping to win significant gains in negotiations. “I live cheque to cheque,” Stellantis Windsor Assembly worker Marco Verro told CBC News on Friday. “I never thought, being from a Big Three family, that I’d be living cheque to cheque working at Fords or Chryslers like my father worked at.”

Responding to the report that the UAW had rejected a 10 percent wage increase offer from GM, veteran Stellantis worker Brian Coombe remarked to CBC. “Ten percent is a joke with... inflation and the cost of living and

all that stuff over the past number of years. It doesn’t even come close. The price of everything is skyrocketing and wages are going absolutely nowhere ... we’re in free fall backwards and everything else is going up.” Coombe told the reporters that pensions should be “at least doubled.”

While workers are determined to fight, Unifor is using the joint expiration of contracts on both sides of the border to deepen its nationalist and corporatist agenda. Together with its predecessor the Canadian Auto Workers, which emerged in a reactionary nationalist split from the UAW in 1985, Unifor has spent the past four decades whipsawing jobs, wages, and benefits back and forth across the Canada-US border to boost corporate profits. The result has been a race to the bottom on wages and conditions among autoworkers in Canada, the US, and Mexico. Autoworkers across North America must decisively repudiate the nationalism peddled by Unifor and the UAW by uniting in struggle to defeat the auto bosses’ global drive to impose the electric vehicle transition on the backs of the working class.

The Unifor leadership has supported Stellantis and Volkswagen in their quest for billions of dollars in public subsidies to underwrite the construction and operation of new electric vehicle (EV) battery plants in Ontario. Unifor expects to be given the franchise to collect dues in these new plants, while assisting the companies in the orderly downsizing and shuttering of existing operations. The bureaucracy’s fulsome support for corporate management during the EV transition goes hand in hand with its close partnership with the pro-austerity, pro-war Liberal government. The Trudeau Liberals intend to position Canadian capitalism as a key player in this rapidly growing economic sphere, by drawing on the country’s plentiful supply of raw materials necessary for electric

vehicle production and by boosting its global “competitiveness,” i.e., ratcheting up the exploitation of workers.

Since it announced on August 29 that Ford is the “target company” for setting a pattern agreement later to be extended to GM and Stellantis, the union leadership has provided workers with as little information as possible. Their aim is to tamp down militant demands for a strike to secure significant increases in wages and benefits amid surging inflation across Canada, the elimination of multi-tier employment, and the preservation of jobs in the transition to the manufacture of EVs.

Unifor provided its first “bargaining update” in nearly two weeks on Monday. The nine-sentence communique, which was devoid of substance, invited workers to submit questions to the union or attend an Auto Talks Information Session on September 14. The social media pages of Unifor and Unifor President Lana Payne have not provided any information on the talks since August 29.

The Unifor apparatus, headed by the seasoned bureaucrat Payne, has worked to keep workers in Canada sealed off from their brothers and sisters in the United States. Payne has repeatedly insisted that Canadian workers have separate interests. Dismissing the possibility of Unifor organizing joint action with US autoworkers, Payne declared at the press conference on August 29, “We are setting our own course, we have our own strategy...[Members] expectations are high for sure but we have our own priorities here in Canada.”

Payne was deliberately vague on the question of workers' demands when she spoke on August 29, saying that the issues around pensions and the transition to electric vehicles are “complicated, technical and will take time to figure out.” She said “progress” was being made with all three companies, but Unifor had picked Ford because it was “serious” about “taking the lead.”

Ford operates an assembly plant in Oakville, Ontario, with 3,400 hourly workers and two engine plants in Windsor, Ontario, employing 1,710 hourly workers. The Oakville plant is set to be retooled next year for the production of EVs. Industry experts have noted that EVs will require significantly fewer workers and components to build, setting the stage for a jobs bloodbath at assembly plants and in the auto parts industry as traditional internal combustion engine vehicles are phased out. With the complicity of both Unifor and the UAW, the automakers and their billionaire investors intend to use this bloodbath to extort further wage cuts and other concessions from

workers.

While there is a stark contrast on the surface between Payne’s quiet deference and UAW President Shawn Fain’s militant posturing and frequent outburst of profanity, they are both pursuing the same anti-worker strategy. Payne and Fain aim to keep workers divided along national lines and enforce historic attacks on their memberships.

Autoworkers need only look to the experience of 3,700 Metro grocery workers in the Greater Toronto Area, who had a sell-out enforced on them by Unifor after a five-week militant strike. Workers walked out after rejecting a miserable tentative agreement which had been hailed by Payne as “the best deal in decades.” The union strung workers out on picket lines, ensuring they remained isolated from other sections of workers in struggle over the same issues. The Unifor bureaucracy then acceded to a court injunction against picketing Metro warehouses before bringing back an even worse deal which had been frontloaded with pay raises to ensure its passage.

Meanwhile in the US auto parts workers at Lear Seating in Hammond, Indiana, rejected a concessionary agreement backed by the UAW last week for the third time. The repeated rejection by the workers of tentative agreements has exposed the pretense that Fain is leading a fight against concessions at the Detroit Three.

Rank and file workers at the Detroit Three in Canada must join their brothers and sisters in the US who have established rank-and-file committees at a series of plants and founded the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to help unify their fight. These committees can enable workers on the shop floor to take the contract struggle into their own hands in opposition to the nationalist and pro-corporate Unifor bureaucracy. In this fight, workers must unite across workplaces and international borders through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in order to win what workers need, not what the union bureaucrats and company executives say they can afford. Contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* for assistance in building a rank and file committee at your plant and developing a new strategy to win your fight.



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