

Unifor keeps Canadian autoworkers in dark, opposes joint struggle with US workers as strike deadline approaches

Carl Bronski
15 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.

For information on joining a rank-and-file committee to organize a fight against concessions, fill out the form at the bottom of this article.

Only hours before the expiration of contracts for 150,000 workers at Ford, General Motors (GM) and Stellantis auto assembly plants in the United States, Unifor President Lana Payne convened on Thursday an online “information session” on the Canadian union’s contract negotiations with Ford Motor Company which kept workers in the dark about any concrete details on demands for significant wage increases, the elimination of tiers, expansion of pensions and guarantees for job security.

Ford was earlier selected by Payne as the target company with which to negotiate a pattern agreement that will then become the template for similar deals with the Canadian operations of GM and Stellantis. All three contracts expire on Monday, September 18, only four days after the United Auto Workers’ strike deadline south of the border.

This year marks the first time that the contracts for 150,000 US autoworkers at the Detroit Three companies expire at virtually the same time as those of 18,000 Canadian autoworkers employed by the same companies. But rather than mobilizing workers in a joint struggle against the auto bosses on both sides of the border, Payne once again pumped out the same nationalist poison that has hamstrung autoworkers for generations.

Payne used the information session to push the union’s “Charting our own course” campaign. This virulently nationalist slogan, aimed deliberately at ramming a wedge between Canadian and American autoworkers who are exploited by the same globally operating auto giants, has been the bureaucracy’s motto for the ongoing auto contract negotiations in Canada. That “Canadian course” has seen decades of concessions contracts forced down the throats of an ever-declining membership in the auto plants as competing nationalist bureaucrats in the UAW and CAW/Unifor have “whip-sawed” jobs and wages back and forth across the border to the lowest bidder in a never-ending race to the bottom.

That divisive strategy could not have been expressed more clearly than Windsor Stellantis Unifor Local 444 President Dave Cassidy’s earlier assertion that “We’re both going in at the same time. The fact of the matter is that if it comes down to product, I can play nice in the sandbox right until the facts come that it’s between us and the

UAW—then the gloves go off.”

Yet, the contract struggle in the United States, according to Payne, has little to do with the contract fight by autoworkers in Canada because of differences in the political, social, economic and contractual environments in the two countries.

What hogwash! The auto industry in North America is so completely integrated that a strike in the United States, Canada or Mexico can quickly stop production across borders. At the meeting, even Payne was forced to admit that should a strike occur among UAW members that it “will impact some or all of our Canadian facilities.”

That “impact” is currently difficult to assess. Already, the UAW bureaucracy is working to suppress any meaningful strike action in the US after contracts there expired late Thursday night. But UAW workers are incensed. Rank-and-file committees in plants there are mobilizing against the unfolding betrayal.

In the United States, as the strike deadline passed on Thursday night, Shawn Fain, Payne’s counterpart at the head of the UAW, quickly went into action to prevent any movement toward an industry-wide strike. Flying in the face of widespread calls for all-out strike action, Fain ordered 95 percent of the membership to remain on the job, only sanctioning token strikes at GM Wentzville Assembly in Missouri, Stellantis Toledo Assembly in Ohio, and the final assembly and paint unit of Ford’s Michigan Assembly.

Payne is aware of the extremely volatile situation. Any developing strike action in the US can cause not only reduced production in some operations in Canada but also, conversely, a re-allocation of resources from strikebound US facilities to Canadian operations—that is to say, an attempt to use Canadian workers to weaken the fight by UAW workers. Either occurrence can convince Canadian autoworkers to quickly enter the fray. Thus, Payne felt it prudent at the meeting to remind Unifor autoworkers that regardless of events in the United States, they must report for their regular shifts until they hear otherwise from the union bureaucracy.

What both Fain and Payne fear above all else is a rebellion by their rank-and-file memberships who are demanding militant, all-out strike action to press their demands. Already, the UAW has instructed workers not to take any solidarity action at non-striking plants. It has distributed flyers telling these workers they cannot resist speedup and forced overtime because under expired contracts they would have no protection from being fired if management accused them of engaging in even a “partial strike.”

For Payne, her order against any militant, independent action by the

membership goes double for autoworkers at Ford Canada who, like their counterparts at Ford and Stellantis, voted by over 98 percent for strikes should agreements not be reached with Unifor. Payne reported at the information session that negotiations with Ford were moving very slowly.

The union president seemed quite perplexed by this. After all, hadn't she developed such strong relationships with a very sympathetic Ford management team? Unifor is a loyal partner. How could they do this to her? "We are meeting resistance from Ford on our priority issues for our members," complained Payne. This "resistance" covers all four of the union's "core economic pillars"—pension improvements, wage package increases, electric vehicle transition support and investment commitments.

Despite Payne's protestations, these concerns are mirrored in the contractual demands of American autoworkers. The stakes for autoworkers on both sides of the border have never been higher. The auto bosses are waging a relentless global assault to reduce labour costs and slash jobs in order to dominate the markets and technologies for electric vehicles (EVs).

Extensive plans have already been prepared to fund the transition to EVs while maintaining their enormous corporate profits by further suppressing wages, defending the divisive two- and three-tier systems, expanding the use of poverty wage Temporary Part-Time (TPT) workers, shredding what remains of protections against forced overtime, increasing production quotas, suppressing income protection during downtime re-tooling and obliterating standard work rules.

Payne and the Unifor top brass are well-informed of these plans since they have helped formulate them. In a deepening of the reactionary tripartite corporatist partnership it has developed over the past four decades with the automakers and the state, the Unifor bureaucracy has been working hand-in-glove with the auto bosses and the federal Liberal and Ontario Tory governments to secure a major role for Canadian capitalists in global EV production. The has included shilling for massive public subsidies and ensuring the "global competitiveness"—here meaning ever-increasing profits—of Canadian industry.

During Thursday's information presentation, Payne gloated, "The tentative settlement we present will be the one that our committee can stand behind, an agreement that our members can be proud of. And if that can't happen, then there will be no deal. And if anyone thinks that I'm bluffing right now, just follow what our union has been doing this past year, these past weeks."

What is she talking about? Payne's record in her first year as president has set new lows for misrepresentation, abject surrender and betrayal. Significant strikes last year at Metro Toronto wholesale grocery warehouses and this year at Windsor Salt and Greater Toronto Metro retail grocery stores all showed workers roundly rejecting miserable tentative contracts enthusiastically proposed by Unifor.

At the Metro warehouses, 900 workers were presented with a virtually identical contract to that they had rejected only the previous week. That "better" deal simply extended the contract from 4 years to 4.5 years and mirrored the same cut in real wages that had previously been boosted by the union.

The same sleight of hand was performed by Payne at the just-defeated Metro retail grocery strike. There, 3,700 poverty-wage workers overwhelmingly rejected a tentative agreement that Payne had gloated was "the best deal in decades." Five weeks later, workers now hard-pressed to even make their monthly rent again were presented with a similar contract but now front-loaded and extended

from 4 to 5 years with real wages by the end of the deal representing yet another cut in living standards.

And at Windsor Salt, miners rejected a unanimously-recommended Unifor contract after months on strike. After 192 days and starved out, a new deal was finally ratified that failed to properly address primary job security concerns.

Autoworkers are very familiar with the unscrupulous methods used by Unifor to ram through rotten agreements. During the 2020 contract fight, rank and file workers presented a well-supported petition demanding that they be given sufficient time to see and discuss full details of any contract before a vote was called. That demand was ignored by the union. Workers at the ratification meetings were once again simply given brief self-serving highlights by the leadership and told to immediately vote without ever seeing the actual contract.

Workers are aware of the immense contractual changes that accompany massive EV change-over. They have seen the insufficient and often unspoken contractual clauses at GM CAMI that destroyed worker protections at that inaugural Canadian EV plant in 2021. In a nutshell, they do not trust their leadership. But at Thursday's information session Unifor's lead negotiator at Ford, Unifor Local 200 President John D'Agnolo, reacting to a flood of rank-and-file demands to democratize ratifications, dodged the concerns with dubious generalities about "accessible and informative" meetings.

Another massive betrayal of the legitimate aspirations of autoworkers is being prepared by both the UAW and Unifor bureaucracies. 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 will 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 the fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact