

Unifor sabotages strike by Canadian Ford autoworkers with 24-hour contract extension

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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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Almost two hours after the expiration of the contract for over 5,600 workers at Ford's Canadian operations Monday at 11:59 p.m., the Unifor union announced in a terse statement that it was arbitrarily extending the contract by 24 hours. The aim of this shabby maneuver was to block a strike at the Ford Oakville Assembly Plant, two smaller engine plants in Windsor and several parts distribution centres in Ontario and Alberta, which would have seen Canadian and US autoworkers on strike together for the first time in decades.

Released around 1:40 a.m., the statement read in part, "The union received a substantive offer from the employer minutes before the deadline and bargaining is continuing throughout the night." Just one day earlier, Unifor President Lana Payne asserted that the Unifor bargaining team and Ford management remained "far apart" at the bargaining table. Earlier Monday evening, she indicated that a strike would be called if no deal was reached by 11:59 p.m.

The late night extension of the contract drew an outpouring of anger and frustration on social media from autoworkers in Canada as well as in the US, where 12,000 out of 146,000 members of the United Auto Workers at the Detroit Big Three are currently on strike.

"Not only did you undermine every workers basic union right to legally strike, you compromised our single most valuable bargaining tool all while spitting in the face of standing in solidarity with the UAW. Great job," wrote one worker on Twitter (X).

"WOW. After zero word coming from the union to support our struggle with this strike and having the nerve to extend negotiations LAST SECOND. Way to go @UniforTheUnion!! Shameful leadership," remarked a worker from Detroit.

Contrary to the claim in Unifor's statement about a last-minute offer, the more likely explanation is that the bureaucracy is pursuing a bait-and-switch strategy to avoid a strike at all costs and to demoralize the rank and file, who voted overwhelmingly for strike action last month. Unifor and its Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) predecessor have not called a strike during a regular bargaining round with the Detroit Big Three in over a quarter of a century.

After announcing that Ford would be Unifor's "target company" in late August, Payne and the rest of the union top brass kept workers in the dark for weeks by providing virtually no information about the discussions with Ford management. The latest announcement underscores once more that rank-and-file workers at Ford, GM and Stellantis plants must take control of the contract struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees in alliance with their US colleagues.

Ford, General Motors and Stellantis management have made clear that they aim in the current bargaining round on both sides of the border to impose historic concessions on the autoworkers, making them pay for the transition to electric vehicle production.

These include forcing older, higher paid workers out of the plants, expanding the use of temporary part-time (TPT) and temporary workers, and enforcing below-inflation pay settlements. Their agenda also involves preparations to slash the workforce dramatically, including by shuttering entire facilities, since estimates suggest 40 percent fewer workers are needed to produce EVs. This strategy enjoys the full backing of the Trudeau Liberal government in Ottawa and the Biden administration in Washington.

The suggestion on the part of Payne and Unifor that a last-minute offer from Ford contained anything that would change this class war agenda and justify workers' delaying strike action for which they voted overwhelmingly is absurd on its face.

In reality, the Unifor bureaucracy stands on the side of corporate management and the Liberal government. It fully supports the premise that workers must be made to pay for the EV transition, as shown by its cheerleading of multibillion-dollar government handouts to the highly profitable automakers to help pay for their EV facilities.

Unifor is also a leading proponent of the protectionist economic policies used by the ruling elites in Canada and the US to secure their domination of the rapidly growing electric vehicle market, which is inseparable from the waging of imperialist wars around the world against great power rivals like Russia and China.

The current bargaining round marks the first time in over two decades that contracts for over 18,000 Canadian autoworkers and 150,000 autoworkers employed by the same companies in the US expired nearly simultaneously. However, Payne and the Unifor apparatus have left no doubt about their bitter hostility to any joint action by North American autoworkers to oppose the global restructuring plans of the bosses.

With the slogan “charting our own course,” Payne has insisted at every opportunity that conditions in Canada are fundamentally different from those in the United States. In a slickly produced video with the same title, she applauded the reactionary split by the CAW, Unifor’s predecessor, from the UAW in 1985. This nationalist maneuver had nothing to do with waging a struggle against the pro-corporate policies enforced by Solidarity House. On the contrary, it created the conditions for the whip-sawing of wages, jobs and benefits back and forth across the border over the intervening four decades as both nationalist factions of the union bureaucracy competed to impose the deepest concessions on autoworkers.

In the days leading up to Monday’s strike deadline, Payne and the Unifor bureaucracy did everything possible to weaken the position of Ford workers in Canada. On Saturday, the union blandly announced in a short update that it had extended contract deadlines with General Motors and Stellantis, which were also set to expire at 11:59 p.m. Monday.

The bureaucracy sought to reassure workers that this is merely “standard practice” in its “pattern collective bargaining,” in which the agreement reached with Ford will serve as the basis for contracts at the other two members of the Detroit Big Three. All this proves is that it has become “standard practice” for the Unifor bureaucracy to sell out its members by isolating them from each other in every bargaining round so as to more effectively impose the bosses’ dictates.

In a desperate attempt to retain some militant credibility, the Unifor leadership issued Friday a “letter of solidarity” with the striking autoworkers in the United States.

South of the border, UAW President Shawn Fain blocked an all-out strike by workers at Ford, GM, and Stellantis facilities when their contracts expired September 14. Instead, in what he disingenuously labelled a “stand-up strike,” Fain called out less than 10 percent of the workers at two-and-a-half plants.

The strike, which has been aptly termed the “bend-over strike” by rank-and-file workers, forces the vast majority of Big Three workers to continue pumping out profits for the automakers while Fain and the UAW bureaucracy conspire with management and the Biden administration behind the scenes to impose a contract on the bosses’ terms.

Unifor’s “solidarity” letter asserted, “Autoworkers in Canada and North America have a history of setting industry standards that extend past the Detroit Three. What we win at the bargaining table raises the bar for all working people.”

The attempt by the Unifor bureaucracy to equate the historic struggles of North American autoworkers from the 1930s and subsequent decades, in which real gains were made, with the round after round of concessions agreed to at the “bargaining table” over the past 40 years by well-paid bureaucrats is grotesque.

Rather than “raising the bar,” workers know all too well that the concessions imposed by Unifor and its CAW predecessor have opened the door to a savage onslaught on working conditions far beyond the auto industry. One need only mention the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath, when the CAW agreed to massive wage cuts for new hires and the introduction of the hated multi-tier wage system, which Unifor has worked diligently to entrench.

This rotten record, together with Unifor’s late-night strike delay announcement, underscores that workers will only be able to secure their demands in the current bargaining round by seizing control of their struggle. This necessitates the construction of rank-and-file committees independently of and in opposition to the Unifor apparatus.

These committees will make it possible to prepare for an all-out strike across the Canadian operations of the Detroit Big Three and establish close links of cooperation through the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to coordinate their strike with autoworkers in the US and Mexico. Only by unifying autoworkers in struggle internationally on the basis of a socialist program can the automakers’ global drive to boost corporate profits be halted and the needs of workers and society as a whole given priority.

We encourage all autoworkers ready to take up this fight to contact us by filling out the form below.



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