

Unifor announces sellout tentative agreement for 5,600 Ford Canada workers to block strike

Our reporters

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Prior to contract ratification meetings scheduled for Saturday, Unifor is refusing to provide rank-and-file workers with any information about the three-year tentative contract it has reached with Ford Canada.

Late Tuesday evening—some 21 hours after it flagrantly violated the mandate of the membership and ignored a Monday, Sept. 18, 11:59 p.m. strike deadline—Unifor announced it had reached a tentative master agreement for 5,600 Ford Canada production, skilled trades and office workers, as well as local agreements.

The master agreement covers some 3,400 workers at Ford's Oakville Assembly Plant, 1,700 workers at two engine plants in Windsor, and several hundred workers at smaller parts distribution centres in Ontario and Alberta.

The agreement is manifestly a sellout, aimed at blocking the development of a united struggle of the more than 19,000 Detroit Three workers in Canada and their 150,000 US counterparts.

In extending the strike deadline by 24 hours, Unifor made the self-serving claim that Ford tabled a “substantive” offer just minutes before 11:59 p.m. Monday. In reality, Unifor was working behind the scenes with the automakers, the UAW, and the Trudeau and Biden governments to concoct a sellout agreement.

The governments in Ottawa and Washington, together with their allies in the union bureaucracies, wanted at all costs to prevent the mobilization of autoworkers in a cross-border strike. This would have represented a challenge to the carefully cultivated nationalist divisions peddled by the union leaderships in Canada and the US for decades to enforce one round of concessions and job cuts after another. Moreover, the unification of North American autoworkers in struggle could serve as a powerful catalyst to the emergence of a mass movement of workers across all economic sectors against capitalist austerity and the squandering of tens of billions of dollars on the imperialist war against Russia, which Ottawa and

Washington are in the process of escalating dramatically.

The UAW bureaucracy, which reluctantly called out 13,000 workers or less than 10 percent of the workforce in a “stand up” strike when contracts expired for 150,000 autoworkers in the US September 14, was firmly opposed to the expansion of the strike to Canada. Ford's Windsor engine plants supply approximately 30 percent of the engines for the F-series truck, the company's most profitable vehicle. Had the Windsor facilities been shuttered in a strike, the impact would have been felt at US plants, which UAW president Shawn Fain has helped ensure remain open so that Ford can continue churning out profits.

The 329-word Unifor “Bargaining Update” announcing the tentative agreement represents a new low even for Unifor, which is notorious for keeping workers in the dark about negotiations and ramming through tentative agreements by trumpeting misleading contract “highlights.” It contains no details whatsoever about the proposed agreement—be it wage or benefit increases or even its duration.

It was left to Ford Canada to reveal in its own statement that the new contract will run for three years. This detail is highly significant, since it confirms that the Unifor bureaucracy wants to decouple future contract negotiations with those in the United States. This year marked the first time in 24 years that contracts for autoworkers on both sides of the border expired simultaneously, presenting autoworkers with a golden opportunity to respond to the auto bosses' global onslaught on jobs and conditions with an international strategy of their own. This prospect is bitterly opposed by the Unifor bureaucracy, which like its UAW counterpart is steeped in foul nationalism. Unifor's predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, was established in a nationalist split from the UAW in 1985, which set the stage for the whipsawing of wages, jobs, and benefits back and forth across the border in a race to the bottom that has continued uninterrupted until today.

In place of concrete information about the proposed deal, which Unifor says will serve as the “pattern” for the contracts of GM and Stellantis Canada workers, the Bargaining Update was full of vague rhetoric. It claimed that Unifor has secured “fundamental, transformative gains that addressed our core priorities of pensions, wages and the EV transition.” Workers

would be entitled to ask why if the “gains” made are so “fundamental” and “transformative,” the Unifor bureaucracy could not at least present them in outline form publicly? The answer is all too obvious: the union leadership fears that if workers get advanced warning of the rotten sellout, they have cooked up with Ford management and the Trudeau government, they will decisively repudiate it.

Significantly, none of the words “cost-of-living clause” or “COLA,” “tiers,” “temporary workers,” “jobs” or “job protections” are mentioned in the Update. This under conditions in which workers’ wages have been battered by inflation, much of the workforce is on a low-wage multi-tier grid, a growing percentage is precariously employed as “temporary workers,” and Ford and the other automakers are planning to use the EV transition to slash jobs wholesale.

The Unifor bureaucrats were far less restrained when it came to heaping praise on themselves. The update praised “the exceptional commitment of your bargaining committee” whose “painstaking work...ensured that negotiations were able to progress.”

The cynicism of this praise and just how determined the Unifor leadership is to prevent a strike was indicated by remarks John D’Agnolo, the head of Unifor’s Ford Master Bargaining Committee and Local 200 president, made to the *Windsor Star*. D’Agnolo, who along with Unifor President Lana Payne led the bargaining committee in “unanimously recommending” the tentative agreement in a vote Tuesday evening, admitted it wasn’t until the next day that he actually read it in full. “Everything is so fluid in bargaining, you don’t have time to consume it all. This morning I looked at it [the tentative agreement] in its entirety and I just said ‘wow,’” D’Agnolo told the *Star* Wednesday.

This isn’t a matter of mere incompetence or laziness. D’Agnolo’s admission is further proof, if any is needed, to the lengths that the Unifor bureaucracy will go to prevent a strike. It sabotaged the strike set to begin Monday night, resulting in a flood of angry social media postings by rank-and-file workers. Then on Tuesday, it rushed to declare a deal had been reached without senior leaders even bothering to peruse its contents.

The Unifor apparatus fears any strike will strengthen the rank-and-file and could quickly escape its control, including worker resistance to any attempt to corral them back on the job prior to a ratification vote.

Nonetheless, in announcing its tentative agreement, Unifor had the audacity to lyingly claim, “We leveraged our union’s most powerful weapon: the right to strike.” In fact, the last time Unifor or its predecessor the Canadian Auto Workers called a strike against one of the Detroit Three during a pattern-settlement bargaining round was in 1996, nearly three decades ago. The last strike at Ford Canada operations was in 1990.

In line with its anti-democratic record, Unifor intends to keep the proposed agreement under wraps until “ratification” meetings Saturday. The union, declares the Bargaining Update,

“will now prepare to present this unanimously endorsed tentative agreement in full detail to the membership at upcoming ratification meetings.”

In Oakville and Windsor, online Zoom conference calls rather than physical in-person meetings will be held, on the ostensible grounds this will enable greater rank-and-file participation. What hogwash! The real purpose is to strengthen the bureaucracy’s control over the meeting, to weed out questions and comments from known militants, silence dissent and prevent workers from speaking to each other as they learn the terms of the sellout agreement.

If Unifor gets its way, workers will be stampeded into voting on their terms of employment for years to come without any chance to see the full contract, let alone study and discuss it with their colleagues.

Workers at Ford Canada and the other Canadian facilities of the Detroit Three must take immediate action to oppose the sellout agreement and Unifor’s intentions to essentially use workers in Canada as scabs against their class brothers and sisters in the US.

They must seize control of the contract struggle from the Unifor bureaucracy by building rank-and-file committees in every plant to return the power to workers on the shop floor. These committees should organize a powerful “No” campaign to defeat the sellout contract and prepare for an all-out strike of all Detroit Three autoworkers in Canada.

Through the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network created by rank-and-file committees at various US plants, Canadian autoworkers can unify their struggle with that of their American brothers and sisters. Only through the development of such an international counter-offensive against the profit-driven agenda of the corporate bosses, and their allies in government and the Unifor and UAW bureaucracies, can workers secure their demands for wage increases that beat inflation, the abolition of multi-tier wages, no layoffs or plant closures during the EV transition, and pension rights.



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