

Reject the Unifor/UAW sabotage operation! Expand the autoworkers struggle across North America!

Roger Jordan
21 September 2023

Sign up for text message updates on the auto contract fight by texting AUTO to (866) 847-1086. Join the next online meeting of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to discuss uniting workers for an all-out strike across the auto industry. Register here to attend.

The trade union bureaucracies on both sides of the Canada-US border are pulling out all the stops to sabotage the contract struggles of nearly 170,000 autoworkers across North America.

In Canada, the apparatus of Unifor, the country's largest industrial union, is trying to ram through an agreement covering 5,600 Ford Motor Company workers in the most blatantly undemocratic manner.

Nearly two hours after the contract expired at 11:59 p.m. Monday, Unifor arbitrarily announced an extension by 24 hours to block a strike. On Tuesday evening, it then claimed to have reached a tentative agreement with “historic” and “transformative gains,” without providing any details on what these alleged “gains” were. It would later emerge that leading members of the bargaining team did not even have time to read the agreement in full before granting it their “unanimous” approval.

With increasingly outraged workers still in the dark about the terms of the tentative agreement, Unifor has scheduled ratification meetings for Saturday and a 10 a.m. Sunday deadline for voting. The meetings will be held on Zoom, in a transparent attempt by the bureaucracy to smother dissent and prevent workers from meeting in person to discuss the sellout. Workers have also been warned that if their email addresses are not up to date, they won't be able to vote, meaning the more exploited workers with more hectic lives will not receive notice and will be denied the right to vote “no.”

Ford workers in Canada should reject this agreement on principle, given the blatant attempt by Unifor to stampede them into accepting a sellout deal. If the contract is so “historic,” why is the union bureaucracy concealing it until Saturday and only giving workers less than 24 hours to make a decision?

A rejection of Unifor's backroom deal with Ford would immensely encourage the development of militant opposition by workers throughout North America. But it would only be the

first step.

The union bureaucracies on both sides of the border are demonstrating that they're working in the interests of the corporations, conspiring with the Trudeau government in Canada and the Biden government in the US against workers. For workers to unite and put a stop to this sabotage, organizational structures under workers' control are needed—rank-and-file factory committees—which will provide a means for workers in Canada, the US, Mexico and elsewhere to communicate with each other and coordinate actions internationally.

Across the border, United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain is in the process of paralyzing the struggle of 150,000 Ford, General Motors and Stellantis workers in the US, who voted overwhelmingly for strike action last month. The UAW has called out less than 10 percent of the workforce at two-and-a-half plants in phony “stand-up” strikes, which are aimed at isolating and demoralizing autoworkers so they are softened up for a sellout.

Instead of calling out all its members, the UAW is enabling the companies to lay workers off plant by plant, with workers kept in the dark on whether they are eligible for unemployment or strike benefits. And by allowing the contracts for the Big Three autoworkers to expire rather than extending them, the UAW is giving the companies a free hand to fire workers for petty infractions, part of the UAW's strategy to wear workers down.

The expansion of the strike to Ford workers in Canada would seriously impact the company's operations, which rely on the engine facilities in Windsor for approximately 30 percent of the engines needed for the F-series truck, Ford's most profitable vehicle. Fain, who has unquestionably reassured the Biden administration that he will ram through sellout contracts, has endeavoured to avoid any serious impact on the Big Three's bottom lines by means of the limited walkouts. He says next to nothing about the struggle in Canada. This is a deliberate attempt to keep US workers uninformed about and isolated from the struggle of their brothers and sisters across the border.

The union bureaucracies in Canada and the US are closely

integrated through a corporatist system of partnerships with the automakers and governments. In Canada, Unifor is a leading proponent of “North America First” economic protectionist policies, which the ruling classes in Ottawa and Washington are using to prepare for war between the great powers. The strengthening of a North American protectionist trade bloc through the consolidation of supply chains for critical raw materials is also key to the automakers’ transition to electric vehicles. The cost of this transition will be borne by autoworkers if the bosses and their union “partners” get their way.

Unifor and the UAW also serve as key pillars of support for the ruling elite’s class war policies, including the imposition of austerity on workers and the dramatic escalation of military spending. While the UAW seeks to smother the autoworkers’ struggle, Ukraine’s President Zelensky is visiting the White House for a meeting with Biden to discuss the escalation of the US/NATO war on Russia.

Under conditions in which recent months have witnessed the development of the largest strike waves in decades across North America, the governments in Washington and Ottawa cannot tolerate the emergence of a cross-border movement that could become a direct challenge to their demands that workers sacrifice through wage “restraint” and austerity to pay for the war.

The determination of Unifor and the UAW to strangle and suppress the autoworkers’ struggle is the latest in a series of betrayals stretching back over the past four decades. Since the reactionary nationalist split by the Canadian Auto Workers in 1985 from the UAW, both American and Canadian factions of the bureaucracy have pitted autoworkers against each other in a race to the bottom in wages, conditions and jobs.

Unifor President Lana Payne has positively reveled in this tradition during the current struggle, the first time in decades US and Canadian autoworkers are negotiating contracts simultaneously, placing them in a powerful position to mount a joint fight. She adopted the slogan “charting our own course,” which aims to convince Canadian autoworkers that they have nothing in common with their US colleagues. She has also hailed the 1985 split as representing “progress.”

The reality is that the “left” and “progressive” arguments used to justify the split served as cover for the bureaucracy’s anti-worker corporatist strategy, which consisted in using the cheaper Canadian dollar and state-funded health care to offer lower labour costs to the globally mobile auto corporations than in the US. The result was that workers on both sides of the border were forced to compete against each other to see who could offer up the biggest concessions.

Autoworkers must act to put a stop to the combined Unifor/UAW sellout!

The Ford workers being asked to vote on a tentative agreement while being effectively blindfolded and gagged by Unifor should decisively repudiate it.

Emergency meetings should be called at locals, resolutions passed in favour of an industry-wide walkout, and preparations made for broadening the strike in the US and launching one at all Big Three operations in Canada.

An all-out strike will only be realized through the initiative of the rank and file. Independent committees must be established at every plant to place power in the hands of workers on the shop floor.

Workers in every country confront globally organized corporations and must unite internationally to counter the automakers’ global onslaught on jobs and conditions. There is a powerful objective basis for this. US and Canadian autoworkers have powerful allies in Mexico, where autoworkers face mass layoffs as part of the transition to EVs. There are developing strikes and contract battles involving autoworkers in Italy, France, Turkey, Germany and many other countries. This is part of a growing upsurge of the working class throughout the world.

In initiating the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the International Committee of the Fourth International explained that its purpose was to coordinate struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions. “The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance,” the ICFI explained.

The battle of US and Canadian autoworkers clearly demonstrates the imperative of the organization of the rank and file to take control of their struggle.

The WSWS urges all autoworkers in the US and Canada to fill out the form below for assistance in establishing a rank-and-file committee in your plant.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact