

Unifor's Dave Cassidy postures as an “opponent” of the Ford Canada sellout—a sham opposition to a rigged ratification process

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In the aftermath of Unifor ramming through a sellout agreement at Ford Canada through an anti-democratic ratification process, Dave Cassidy, the president of Unifor's Windsor-area Local 444, has struck a phony posture of militant opposition to the national leadership.

Addressing a meeting of Stellantis Chrysler autoworkers last week, Cassidy claimed he was opposed to the Ford deal, which Unifor President Lana Payne has breathlessly described as a “historic” and “life changing” contract victory for workers. One that Payne and the union top brass are insisting must serve as the “pattern” for agreements with Stellantis and GM Canada.

Over 600 Stellantis Windsor Assembly autoworkers who gathered at their union hall strenuously disagreed and insisted that any deal with Stellantis should not follow the pattern negotiated at Ford. That three-year agreement perpetuates the hated multi-tier wage system and imposes, when recent inflation losses and projected future rates are taken into account, an effective real-wage standstill. It also provides Ford with the Electric Vehicle (EV) refit framework to slash jobs wholesale and to push the highest-seniority workers into retirement and replace them with lower-paid new hires and temporary workers.

Worker after worker at the meeting took to the floor to denounce the so-called pattern contract as unacceptable—as a sellout of their legitimate demands for an end to years of declining real wages and steadily eroding pensions.

Workers also spoke out against the rigged ratification process by which Unifor declared the Ford Canada contract ratified. This included: suppressing the release of the contract “highlights” until just before the ratification vote began; holding a single online Zoom information meeting; preventing workers from seeing the full contract; and, in an attempt to stampede the membership, restricting the time allowed for workers to consider their vote to some 24 hours.

Fearing that their “historic” deal could go down to defeat, the union bureaucracy re-opened ballot registration mid-vote with appeals from supporters of the bureaucracy directed at specially targeted individuals to register and pass the contract. Unifor even violated its ratification rules for skilled trades and overrode the contract's rejection by that section of the membership.

Cassidy, who also holds the position of Unifor's National Skilled Trades Chair, has criticized Payne's suppression of skilled trades' rights, saying the union should have listened to their grievances before declaring the contract ratified.

However, this opposition is entirely two-faced, since Cassidy has also said Payne and the Unifor Ford Master Bargaining Committee were within their rights to declare the contract ratified—despite the fraudulent character of the vote and the union's breaking of its own rules regarding the need to secure skilled trade support.

In the end, Unifor—after initially refusing to providing full vote totals—announced under membership pressure that only 54 percent of the voting membership at Ford passed the tentative agreement. Significantly, the largest Ford local, at the company's Oakville Assembly plant, joined the skilled trade workers in rejecting the deal outright.

Cassidy: a tried-and-true representative of the Unifor bureaucracy

With a veritable rebellion brewing amongst whole swathes of the 18,000-strong union membership in the auto assembly plants of the Detroit Three in Canada, Cassidy, a longtime tried-and-tested Unifor official, has stepped forward to “ride the tiger.” His main aim in so doing is to derail and suppress a potential rank-and-file rebellion. That is, to ensure workers' anger remains contained within Unifor's procedures and under the control of the bureaucratic apparatus.

There has not been a strike at the Canadian operations of Stellantis (previously Chrysler) since 1987 or any of the Detroit Three for a quarter of a century. “People lose faith,” complained Cassidy in his remarks to the Local 444 meeting.

The growing crisis in the union also provides Cassidy with an opportunity to re-establish his diminished influence at Unifor headquarters after his humbling, last place finish in the 2022 race for the union presidency. That position had been vacated by disgraced former president Jerry Dias after his implication in a seedy Covid test kit kickback scandal. Last week, Cassidy was quick to remind his opponents of his renewed importance in stabilizing the increasingly discredited union. “It (the contract) don't ratify without me,” he told reporters.

There are about 8,230 Unifor workers employed by Stellantis in Canada. Cassidy's “home plant” in Windsor is currently in shutdown

for re-tooling until early November. It is the only plant among the Detroit Three that—once the final electric vehicle refit takes place next year—will assemble internal combustion, hybrid and fully electric vehicles. Its sister plant in Brampton, Ontario will see its muscle car production wound down, followed by a near year long shutdown for a full EV refit. Bargaining with Stellantis will not take place until the General Motors contract, currently being negotiated, is ratified.

Any worker who may be taken in by Cassidy's new found pose as a fighter for the rank-and-file against the union bureaucracy should consider his history as a long-time union official and loyal hand-raiser for a stream of concessions contracts negotiated by the union beginning in 2005 as a member of the Canadian Autoworkers (and then Unifor's) National Executive Council.

During the current Detroit Three negotiations, he has been a leading proponent of the union's virulently nationalist "Charting our own Course" campaign. This campaign is designed to perpetuate and intensify the bureaucracy's promotion of Canadian nationalism, which has served for the past four decades to pit US and Canadian workers against each and justify, in the name of defending "Canadian jobs," imposing massive wage and benefit concessions on autoworkers. The UAW has pursued a like course. Under conditions in which contracts for autoworkers in Canada and the US expired almost simultaneously this year for the first time in over two decades, "Charting our own course" underscored that Payne, Cassidy, and Co. were determined at all costs to prevent a joint struggle by Canadian autoworkers with their 150,000 colleagues south of the border.

The global auto companies, including the Detroit Three in Canada and the United States, are waging a major onslaught on the workers who labour in their factories. The auto bosses are demanding that the developing switch-over to EV production be paid for by further reducing labour costs in the factories. But rather than mobilizing workers in a joint struggle against the Detroit Three on both sides of the border, Unifor is pumping out the same nationalist poison that has hamstrung autoworkers for generations by splitting the workforce and allowing the companies to "whipsaw" jobs, wages and conditions back and forth across the border to the lowest bidder.

Addressing the fact that both Canadian and American auto contracts are coming up at the same time, Cassidy spoke for the entire Unifor leadership when he told reporters earlier this year that the union's strategy of offering lower labour costs than the American UAW will continue. "We're both going in at the same time," said Cassidy. "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."

All of this is bound up with the pursuit of a pro-company agenda based on the union's long-time participation in a series of permanent and ad hoc tripartite partnerships with representatives of big business and the government aimed at boosting corporate "competitiveness" and investment.

One example of this is Ontario's Advanced Manufacturing Council, where Cassidy works to advise government alongside a whole coterie of big business magnates that include former Magna International CEO Don Walker; Catherine Cobden, president and CEO of the Canadian Steel Producers Association; and Dennis Darby, president and CEO of the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters.

Cassidy is far from the first union bureaucrat to try to attract workers' support with militant slogans only the better to sell them out to the bosses. Unifor Local 444 members only need to look across the Detroit River to see the role that UAW President Shawn Fain is

playing. Fain, who presented himself as a "left" and "reformer" during last year's UAW presidential election, has emerged as the chief obstacle to any genuine strike by the 150,000 US autoworkers at the Detroit Three. His bogus "stand-up strike" policy has kept over 80 percent of UAW members on the job pumping out profits for the auto bosses. Fain and the UAW are working closely with the Biden administration, just like the Unifor bureaucracy partners with Trudeau, to suppress the class struggle and ram through the corporations' dictates.

Unifor's role as a cheap-labour contractor for corporate Canada flows directly from the social position of the bureaucrats who staff the union apparatus. Living on their six-figure salaries and lavish expense accounts, Unifor officials have far more in common with corporate executives and government ministers than they do with the workers they claim to represent. Fervent proponents of Canadian nationalism and the interests of the capitalist state, they work to secure a "competitive" advantage for their "own" businesses and investors.

Cassidy's criticism of the Ford contract is meant as a warning to the bureaucracy to be on its guard, lest a movement of rank-and-file workers from below escapes the union's suffocating control and develops into an open rebellion against the entire big business establishment.

Conditions for such a movement developing are increasingly favourable. The significant opposition to the sellout of the struggle at Ford must be seen as the first step in a broader mobilization. Workers at Ford, GM and Stellantis 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. They must turn to their fellow autoworkers in the United States, some of whom have been on strike at the Detroit Three for several weeks, and further south in Mexico to unify and mobilize a North America-wide struggle against the transnational corporations which have been raking in billions of dollars in profits hand over fist on the backs of all those who create that wealth—the international working class.



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