4,300 GM Canada autoworkers take to picket lines as strike against Detroit Three spreads across North America

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Are you a GM worker in Canada? We want to hear from you. Click here to fill out the form at the end of this article to tell us what you're striking for and discuss joining a rank-and-file committee.

Forty-three hundred autoworkers at the GM Oshawa Assembly Plant, St. Catherine's power train facility, and Woodstock parts distribution centre have launched strike action. They walked out shortly after their contract—which had been extended by Unifor as part of its "pattern" bargaining strategy—expired at 11:59 p.m. Monday.

The walkout marks the first strike by Canadian autoworkers in a regular bargaining round since 1996 and broadens the struggle by autoworkers against the Detroit Three across North America.

The strike is taking place above all due to the militancy of the rank-and-file. Workers, whose living standards have been battered by decades of concessions and three years of rampant inflation, are determined to win significant wage and pension increases from the automakers, who have been raking in profits hand over fist. They are also fighting for job protections, as the Detroit Three seek to use the transition to electric vehicle (EV) production to slash jobs wholesale and intensify worker exploitation.

To succeed, striking GM workers must take urgent action to place control of the struggle into their own hands by establishing rank-and-file strike committees. These committees should fight to extend the strike to all Detroit Three operations in Canada and unify the struggle with the 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the United States who have been without contracts since Sept. 15. Workers south of the border are pressing for an all-out strike, but the UAW bureaucracy, led by Shawn Fain, has authorized job action by less than a fifth of the workforce, under the union's phony "Stand Up Strike" strategy, ensuring the automakers continue to pump out huge profits.

Throughout the current round of bargaining, Lana Payne and the entire Unifor apparatus have sought to keep Canadian autoworkers separated from their US class brothers and sisters. Under the nationalist slogan "charting our own course," the union leadership has perpetuated the virulent Canadian nationalism that it has used over the past four decades to pit Canadian, US, and Mexican autoworkers against each other in a race to the bottom on wages, conditions, and benefits. The GM Canada strike creates an opportunity for autoworkers to break through this conspiracy and develop a unified North America-wide struggle in opposition to the auto bosses' global plans to restructure the industry for EV production at workers' expense.

As far as the Unifor leadership is concerned, the strike was only called reluctantly and above all with the aim of maintaining control over a restive membership angered by the thoroughly anti-democratic methods used by the bureaucracy to ram through a sellout agreement at Ford Canada. Unifor President Lana Payne had the temerity to claim that the strike was merely about securing the same rotten terms agreed to with Ford, declaring, "This strike is about General Motors stubbornly refusing to meet the pattern agreement. The company knows our members will never let GM break our pattern—not today—not ever." She added that "a lot of ground" needs to be covered to "reach a tentative agreement."

The Ford agreement contained a pathetic 15 percent wage "increase" over three years, which amounts to an effective freeze when inflation is taken into account. It also contained buyout plans for about 10 percent of Ford Canada's workforce to encourage the highest paid workers to retire so the automaker can replace them with lower-paid new hires. The hated multi-tier wage system was perpetuated, and provisions made to allow Ford to carry out its transition to electric vehicle construction at the expense of autoworkers. These included no firm job commitment for the Oakville Assembly Plant and the limiting of supplementary unemployment benefit to 70 percent of normal wages.

The sham ratification process used by Unifor to get the Ford agreement passed underlines its pro-corporate character. They kept silent about the deal's contents for over three days, then held one online ratification meeting where speeches were controlled by the bureaucracy and gave workers less than 24 hours to vote. Fearing that the contract could go down to defeat, the Unifor apparatus reopened registration and arranged for

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emails to be sent to temporary part-time workers urging them to sign up and vote for the deal, which they were encouraged to do with the prospect of a $4,000 signing bonus. To top it all off, the bureaucracy ran roughshod over the union's own rules by declaring the contract ratified in spite of it being voted down by skilled trades workers.

Given this record, Payne's statement that the strikers are fighting to retain the "pattern" is more of a threat against the workers than the corporate executives at GM, with whom Payne, GM Master Bargaining Chair Jason Gail, and their fellow union bureaucrats enjoy friendly relations. The reality is that rank-and-file workers must "break" the pattern to secure their demands. These should include a 30 percent pay increase to make good for years of real wage reductions, an end to multi-tier wages, full-time jobs for all, and guaranteed pay for all workers during the EV transition paid for by the bumper profits provided GM by the blood and sweat of autoworkers in Canada, the US, Mexico, and around the world.

There are several issues specific to GM Canada that Unifor has claimed to be fighting for. The complete shutdown of the Oshawa Assembly Plant was only averted in 2019 by Unifor's acceptance of sweeping concessions, including the laying off or retirement of almost all full-time workers. The majority of GM Oshawa employees are temporary part-time workers with relatively little experience. GM is reportedly dragging its feet on offering several hundred of these workers a path to full-time employment so as to keep labour costs down, even though they work full-time hours. Payne remarked on the issue, "We see this as a pattern agreement issue and we are adamant that it must be addressed. On this matter there is considerable disagreement between us and GM."

This is rich coming from the leader of an organization that agreed to the creation of two- and multi-tier wages and benefits following the 2008 financial crisis and subsequently accepted the creation of a large precariously employed TPT workforce. The "misuse" of TPTs the Unifor bureaucracy now denounces was the inevitable product of previous agreements touted by this very same privileged apparatus of functionaries, who have more in common with their corporate "partners" than workers on the shop floor.

GM claims that "very positive progress" was made in talks over recent days. In addition to defending its right to exploit TPTs as full-time workers, the company is demanding concessions on retirement packages for GM workers in comparison to the Unifor-Ford agreement.

Favourable conditions exist for striking GM Canada workers to beat back the concessions demanded by the company and supported by the Unifor bureaucracy. Over 8,200 autoworkers at Stellantis operations in Windsor and Brampton remain in a contract struggle and would respond with enthusiasm to an appeal to join the GM strike. So would workers at Ford, who remain livid with the bureaucracy over its sham ratification of their contract.

South of the border, around 20,000 UAW members at the Detroit Three's operations are already on strike, and there is a growing movement that is being given political and organizational leadership by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network for an all-out strike.

Like the close relationship Unifor enjoys with the Liberal government in Ottawa, Fain and the UAW are working closely with the Biden administration to suppress the class struggle under conditions in which an all-out strike by North American autoworkers would serve as a powerful catalyst for a broader industrial and political offensive by the working class against austerity and war.

This requires a rebellion by rank-and-file workers against the union bureaucracy, whose main concerns are to retain their extensive corporatist ties with the state and big business, and to smother opposition in the working class to the rising cost of living and the ruling class's drive to make working people pay for its predatory war with Russia. The way to carry this out has been shown by Mack Trucks workers in the US, who established a rank-and-file committee to take control of their contract fight away from the UAW bureaucrats. The workers overwhelmingly voted down a concessions-filled contract backed by the UAW as an "historic" deal and are now on strike at facilities in Pennsylvania and Florida.

The establishment of rank-and-file strike committees by GM Canada workers would enable them to appeal directly for solidarity strikes by auto and parts workers throughout the industry, as well as other sections of workers in manufacturing, health, education, and the public sector facing similar attacks on their jobs and conditions. Critically, they would facilitate the unification of autoworkers' struggles across national borders through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The IWA-RFC, which includes rank-and-file committees at several Big Three plants in the United States, fights for a joint struggle by Canadian, American, and Mexican autoworkers against the automakers' savage drive to boost corporate profits, and for decent-paying, secure jobs for all. This means the fight to end the subordination of the auto industry to the obscene accumulation of wealth by the corporations and investors and place it under the democratic control of the workers so it can serve the interests of society.

We strongly urge all striking GM workers and autoworkers throughout the industry who wish to expand the strike and support the building of rank-and-file committees to fill out the form below.

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