

After sabotaging strike, Unifor rams through sellout contract at GM Canada

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The Unifor bureaucracy succeeded over the weekend in ramming through a sellout contract for 4,300 autoworkers at GM Canada in yet another anti-democratic ratification process. As at Ford, the union bureaucracy presented rank-and-file workers only with selected “highlights” from the three-year deal and made them vote on it, all within the space of 24 hours.

The ambush of autoworkers by the Unifor leadership came just days after it sabotaged a strike at GM Canada. If only briefly, the 14-hour Oct. 10 strike opened up the possibility of a joint struggle with American Detroit Three autoworkers, many of whom are currently on the picket lines and fighting the automakers' plans to make workers pay for their global transition to electric vehicle production.

Throughout the 2023 Detroit Three contract struggle, Unifor has been determined to prevent a joint cross-border struggle against the auto bosses, as exemplified by its “charting our own course” strategy. Like the UAW south of the border, Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, have for decades pursued a national-corporatist policy that pits Canadian and US workers against each other in a race to the bottom, facilitating massive job cuts and round after round of concessions.

A key Unifor aim and outcome of its pushing through three-year contracts at Ford and now GM is the “decoupling” of future Detroit Three bargaining rounds in Canada and the US, thereby placing further legal and institutional impediments to workers in the US, Canada and Mexico mounting a joint struggle.

According to Unifor, 80.5 percent of GM workers who voted approved the deal. Support was much higher among production workers at 83 percent than among skilled trades, who only passed the agreement by a narrow 55.9 percent.

Having been shaken by the massive opposition to its “pattern” agreement at Ford, Unifor pulled out all the stops to try to rally support for it at GM.

Central to this was exploiting the plight of GM's large number of “temporary” full-time workers, a category that does

not exist at Ford. In line with the previous contract approved by Unifor, GM has been treating these full-time workers in the same abysmal manner it treats the other Temporary Part Time workers (TPTs)—paying them little more than poverty-level wages and benefits, and denying them virtually all of the rights accorded permanent workers. This has been particularly true at the Oshawa Assembly Plant.

In promoting the GM agreement, Unifor made much of the fact that it calls for all temporary full-time workers (known in contract jargon as full-time TPTs) to receive a \$10,000 signing bonus, or more than double the \$4,000 offered to the other TPTs at GM and those at Ford. In addition, the Unifor bureaucracy secured a commitment from GM to transfer several hundred full-time TPTs onto the lowest rung of the multi-tier wage system, provided they have at least a year of service.

Unifor President Lana Payne has made much of the supposedly “historic” increases that this group of full-time TPTs will now receive. In reality, what is “historic” is Unifor's continuing sanctioning and entrenching of new categories of low-paid workers with few to any rights, be they TPTs or multi-tier permanent workers. Under the agreement, GM is allowed to continue to use full-time TPTs until August 2026, giving the company three more years to reap bumper profits from this highly exploited section of workers.

The three-year deal includes the same effective wage freeze rammed through at Ford: a 10 percent pay increase in year one, followed by 2 percent and 3 percent in years two and three respectively. This settlement will prove doubly hard on the approximately 1,100 workers at the St. Catherines Propulsion Plant, who will be laid off for at least 12 months from the first quarter of 2024 during a plant refit for electric vehicle production. During this period, they will have to survive on supplementary employment benefit (SUB), which is set at a mere 70 percent of their regular wage. At GM's CAMI facility in Ingersoll, which operates under a separate contract, workers were forced to turn to food banks during their plant's EV transition.

Unifor will now seek to impose a similar sellout on the over 8,200 workers at Stellantis, who have already made clear their determination to break the “pattern” that Payne and the union

top brass have touted as “life changing.”

The events at GM underscore once again that to wage a genuine struggle, Stellantis workers must urgently establish their independence from the union bureaucracy by building rank-and-file committees at the Windsor and Brampton plants to place control of the contract struggle in the hands of workers on the shop floor. Absent this development, the bureaucracy will bring back the same rotten “pattern” and seek to ram it through using the anti-democratic methods it has perfected over the past four decades.

If Windsor-area Local 444 President Dave Cassidy has made a show of criticizing the Unifor “pattern,” it is to try to contain and suppress the opposition among Stellantis workers, so as to protect the union bureaucracy of which he is a loyal and longstanding member.

The bankruptcy of the Unifor leadership’s nationalist and pro-corporate strategy is made particularly evident by events over recent years at General Motors. In 2019, then-Unifor President Jerry Dias enthused over the “saving” of the Oshawa Assembly Plant from shutdown with an agreement that eliminated close to 90 percent of the almost 3,000 jobs at the facility. Having secured continued employment for a mere 300 workers, Unifor created the conditions under which GM could restart production just over a year later with close to 2,000 workers, the vast majority of whom were either TPTs or new hires on the lowest rung of GM’s eight-year multi-tier wage system.

The Unifor bureaucracy has intensified this course with the Detroit Three’s EV transition. While championing tens of billions of dollars in subsidies for the highly profitable automakers from the provincial and federal governments to fund plant retooling and new battery facilities, the Unifor leadership continues its close collaboration with its “partners” in corporate management to ensure that workers’ wages and benefits remain at best frozen, and virtually none of the concessions given up over the past four decades are clawed back.

This policy is enthusiastically endorsed by Unifor’s allies in the federal Liberal government, which aims to transform Canada into a leader in global EV production by providing easy access to raw materials, and “competitive” conditions for big business with low labour costs and reduced regulations. The Liberals are supported through a formal agreement by the Canadian Labour Congress-sponsored New Democrats, who enthusiastically praised the agreement rammed through by Unifor at Ford as a “victory.”

A similar policy is being pursued by Shawn Fain and the UAW apparatus in the United States. Fain’s bogus “stand-up strike” policy has allowed the Detroit Three to keep their most profitable plants running despite contracts for close to 150,000 workers having expired over a month ago. Fain and the UAW, which has imposed concessions on US autoworkers over the past four decades no less sweeping than those accepted by Unifor, are in close contact with the Biden administration in

order to suppress working class opposition and enforce a pro-company settlement at the earliest opportunity.

Despite the bureaucracy’s “victory” over the rank and file at GM, a tremendous opportunity to unite Canadian and American autoworkers in struggle against the Big Three remains. The strike by close to 4,000 workers at Mack Trucks in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Florida in an open rebellion against the UAW leadership demonstrates that an alternative to concessions-filled contracts rammed through by the bureaucracy is possible. At Mack, workers voted down a union-backed contract after building the Mack Truck Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight for demands elaborated by workers on the shop floor.

Several rank-and-file committees at Detroit Three auto plants in the US have created the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to coordinate their struggle. With over 20,000 US Detroit Three workers on the picket line and over 100,000 workers ready to join them, workers at Stellantis operations in Canada can contribute to a powerful continent-wide fight back by seizing control of their contract struggle from the Unifor leadership, building rank-and-file committees, and linking up with their American colleagues.

Securing workers’ demands for inflation-busting pay increases and job protections during the transition to electric vehicles requires a unified counter-offensive by autoworkers across North America against the ruling elite’s policies of austerity and war. Under conditions of the largest strike wave in decades, this fight would attract the support of workers across all economic sectors, who face the same attacks on their jobs and living standards. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees fights to provide the organizational and political leadership for such a movement. We strongly urge all autoworkers ready to take up this fight to fill out the form below or contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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