

After the ratification at Stellantis: Lessons from the 2023 Canadian Detroit Three contract struggle

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Unifor announced November 6 that autoworkers at Stellantis Canada had voted in favour of a three-year tentative agreement in online balloting by just 60 percent. The ratification of the agreement for 8,200 workers at Stellantis facilities in Ontario and Alberta brings to a close the 2023 Detroit Three contract struggle in Canada, as Unifor previously pushed through like sellout agreements at Ford and GM.

This bargaining round, taken as a whole, provided yet more proof of the union bureaucracy's bitter hostility to the interests of rank-and-file workers. In a conspiracy against the membership, Unifor President Lana Payne and the union top brass worked behind the scenes to negotiate pro-company contracts that ensure the Detroit Three will continue rolling in profits during the transition to electric vehicle (EV) production, while workers endure precarious employment, multi-tier wages, and gruelling working conditions.

The critical lesson to be drawn from this experience, which follows the same pattern of the past four decades, is that only in a rebellion against the union bureaucracy to place power in the hands of workers on the shop floor can autoworkers wage a genuine struggle for their demands. This struggle necessitates the building of rank-and-file committees at every plant, and the unification of Canadian autoworkers with their class brothers and sisters in the US and Mexico in a joint struggle against the profit-hungry, internationally mobile auto giants.

While this year's contract talks have officially concluded, workers throughout the auto industry will be faced with major struggles in the months and years ahead, as North America and the world are roiled by economic crisis and war. Moreover, the auto bosses see the newly-minted contracts as a critical component in their plans to restructure the industry worldwide to increase worker exploitation and profits through the transition to EV production. This process has been ably facilitated by the Unifor bureaucracy, which has suppressed worker opposition while pressing for huge federal and provincial government subsidies to the already highly profitable automakers.

Within hours of the announced ratification at Stellantis, 900 auto parts workers at Magna Integram Windsor Seating in Lakeshore, Ontario walked off the job over wages, benefits and pensions. The facility builds seats for vehicles assembled at Stellantis' Windsor Assembly Plant. The transition to electric vehicles is projected to result in a bloodbath in jobs and significant turmoil for those that remain in the auto parts sector.

Unifor's sellout pattern and the anti-democratic methods the bureaucracy used to prevail over rank-and-file opposition

Aside from minor local differences, the agreement at Stellantis follows the pattern established first at Ford. It provides for total wage increases over three years of 15 percent, plus a limited cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) which won't kick-in until December 2024. This means workers will keep treading-water for the life of the contract, amid a sustained cost of living crisis which has seen a massive surge in the price of food, housing and utilities since 2020.

The contract maintains the hated tiered progression for wages and pensions. It also provides for SUB (supplemental unemployment benefit) pay at just 70 percent of wages for full-time employees with a full-year experience during layoffs in the transition to electric vehicle production.

The question of adequate SUB pay is especially critical for workers at Stellantis' Brampton Assembly plant. They are expected to be on layoff for much of the contract, with shutdown for retooling beginning in January, the first shift not projected to return to work until the end of 2025, and the third shift only resuming in the latter half of 2026. It is worth noting that, as always, all of these projections are dependent on Stellantis' "business considerations." The promise of the return of a third shift in Windsor contained in the last contract negotiated with Unifor was never fulfilled. The loss of the third shift in 2020 cost 1,500 jobs.

Workers at Windsor Assembly have also faced extensive layoffs, with further uncertainty in the coming months, as the company establishes separate lines for EV, hybrid and internal combustion engine vehicle production. The return of a third shift at Windsor is only "expected" during the contract, not guaranteed.

The agreement also gives short shrift to current retirees—who have no right to vote on contracts—a point of contention for many workers who voted "No."

Finally, there are no firm guarantees for employment numbers across the Big Three's Canadian operations following the EV transition. Industry analysts expect EV vehicles to require 40 percent less labour. If production remains under management control and continues to be organized to enrich investors not serve working people, this will translate into hundreds of thousands of job cuts across Canada and the US.

The Unifor apparatus, led by President Lana Payne, waged a sustained campaign to ensure that the pro-company sellout was passed at all three companies, haranguing workers with the claim that it was "historic," "record breaking" and "life changing." When this wasn't enough, they dangled signing bonuses and turned to anti-democratic methods.

The Unifor "pattern" passed at Ford with the support of just 54 percent who those voted, and was rejected outright by skilled trades workers and

production workers at Oakville Assembly, the company's largest Canadian plant. When it became clear that the vote would be close, Unifor officials encouraged temporary part-time workers (TPTS) to register and vote after an internal deadline had already passed. After the vote concluded, Unifor used bureaucratic maneuvers to override the skilled trades' rejection despite a long standing practice which gave them a veto.

At GM, the bureaucracy relied on the large share of highly exploited temporary full-time workers, using the promise that they would be rolled over to full-time positions, to achieve an 80.5 percent "Yes" vote. After the narrow ratification at Ford, Unifor called a phony 12-hour strike at GM for the purpose of pulling the wool over workers eyes, claiming that it was "fighting" the company's intransigence to meet the inadequate pattern.

The same stunt was pulled at Stellantis with an even shorter strike, just seven hours—a middle-of-the-night pin prick action which had no effect on production. Turning the purpose of labour action on its head, these "strikes" were called by Unifor not to fight the companies but for the purpose of pressuring and confusing workers.

Further, Windsor Local 444 President Dave Cassidy, who had initially postured as a critic of the pattern for the purpose of corralling growing opposition, turned around and declared the pattern was the best the union could get and Stellantis workers could do nothing to oppose it. Despite this treachery and Unifor's manifest opposition to any struggle, 40 percent of workers voted "No."

Throughout the contract talks, which began in August, the Unifor bargaining team kept workers in the dark, providing sporadic "updates" which provided no concrete details on what was being proposed by either the automakers or the union.

In line with their nationalist-corporatist strategy, Unifor officials worked overtime to keep Canadian workers separate from their colleagues at the Detroit Three in the United States who faced nearly simultaneous contract expirations for the first time in decades. This found expression in Payne's repeated declarations that the union was "charting our own course." To further impede joint action by US and Canadian workers, Unifor negotiated three-year contracts, thereby decoupling the contract expiration in Canada and the US in years to come.

The way forward for autoworkers

While some Canadian autoworkers saw the militant posturing of United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain and the UAW's "stand up" strike across the Detroit Three as representing an alternative to Unifor, the UAW apparatus ensured the strike never substantially affected corporate profits and that no more than 25 percent of UAW members were ever on the picket lines. Throughout the strike, Fain was in consultation with US President Joe Biden and his right-wing Democratic Party administration. Having robbed rail workers of their right to strike and played a central role in imposing a real wage-cutting contract on West Coast dockers, Biden worked to boost Fain, even appearing momentarily on a UAW picket line, while they collaborated to suppress the class struggle and guarantee the "global competitive position" — that is profitability—of the Detroit Three.

With the UAW's announcement of tentative agreements and undemocratic shut down of the strike, there is growing opposition to the proposed contracts, which American workers now see are clearly a sellout. They contain meager wage increases and the maintenance of temporary workers over nearly 5-year contracts.

Just as the UAW works with the Biden administration, Unifor supports and coordinates with the Liberal Trudeau government. On both sides of the border, the governments rely on the assistance of the unions as they

wage war on two fronts: against the working class at home and abroad as they seek the imperialist redision of the world—whether it is against Russia in Ukraine or by backing Israel's genocide in Gaza.

The latest round of auto talks has shown once again that workers encounter in Unifor an organization that operates as a partner of the corporations and works with the government to smother working class resistance. Faced with growing worker opposition and determination to win back decades of concessions, the Unifor bureaucracy resorts to ever more anti-democratic methods to stifle dissent and manipulate the outcome.

The defeat of a series of tentative agreements negotiated by Unifor, including at Metro grocery stores, Windsor Salt and the St. Lawrence Seaway, was followed by redoubled efforts by Payne and Co. to ram through essentially the same contracts. Last year's ouster of former President Jerry Dias over taking kickbacks to market COVID tests underscores the corrupt character of the bureaucracy.

This corruption arises out of the corporatism espoused by Unifor and its Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) predecessor for the past 40 years. The reactionary nationalist split by the CAW from the UAW in 1985 was carried out with the conception that the cheaper Canadian dollar and state-funded health care would allow the CAW to offer the Detroit Three cheaper labour costs north of the border, thereby attracting more investments and jobs. It has served to divide autoworkers along national lines, creating the perfect conditions for the auto bosses to whipsaw wages, jobs, and conditions back and forth across the border with the enthusiastic collaboration of the UAW and CAW/Unifor bureaucrats. This close collaboration led to the creation of numerous corporate-union joint committees, projects, and other initiatives, while the unions on both sides of the border became ever more openly integrated into the state. Unifor is now one of the key pillars of support for the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau Liberal government.

The issue for workers who find themselves trapped within this organization is not one of pressuring the corrupt, corporatist Unifor apparatus or seeking to reform it. The latest bargaining round has also made clear that anger with the bureaucracy and a militant determination to fight, while justified and necessary, are inadequate.

Workers must mount a conscious rebellion against the Unifor leadership and repudiate its pro-capitalist, nationalist-corporatist perspective. This means building rank-and-file committees, uniting workers across plants and different employers in the auto and auto parts sector, and mobilizing for joint international action against the globally organized auto makers.

The growing network of rank and file committees in the United States serves as a model for Canadian autoworkers and one they must turn to as they develop their own struggle. Socialist Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman ran for president of the UAW last year on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and placing power back in the hands of the rank and file. It is this program that workers in Canada must take up as their own to fight for concrete unity with their brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and beyond.



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