

UAW reaches deal with Ford, calls off bogus strike threat at Ford Kentucky Truck Plant

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United Auto Workers Local 862 officials announced Wednesday morning that they reached a tentative agreement with Ford Motor Co. on local contract issues and would not be calling 9,000 workers out on strike at the Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville, Kentucky this Friday. UAW Local 862 President Todd Dunn said voting on the deal will take place between February 28 and March 1 after a series of “townhall” meetings starting this week.

Workers at the plant build heavy-duty F-series pickup trucks and other highly profitable vehicles and were called out briefly during UAW President Shawn Fain’s phony “stand up” strike last fall.

The strike “threat” from the UAW bureaucracy was nothing but theatrics. Last fall, Fain and UAW Vice President Chuck Browning rammed through a pro-company contract that has given Ford a green light to slash jobs and shift the costs of the transition to electric vehicles entirely on the backs of autoworkers.

Just last week, Ford CEO Jim Farley said the company was reconsidering its “footprint” in the US and might shift pickup truck production to Mexico. UAW Local 862 President Dunn said Farley’s comments didn’t “have any bearing” on a potential local strike.

Workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* said the strike notice took them by surprise and that they have been left in the dark by the UAW about the supposed issues in dispute.

Workers at the factory are known for their militant opposition to UAW-backed sellout contracts. Last year, KTP workers defeated the UAW-Ford deal brought back by Fain. They also defeated earlier UAW-backed national agreements in 2019, 2015 and 2011. If a strike was called, it would have been aimed at bolstering the credibility of the UAW bureaucracy, which is widely despised.

As more details of the 2023 national contract emerge, it is becoming clearer to workers that the supposed “historic” contract was nothing of the kind. The New Year opened with all three automakers announcing job cuts and layoffs. Ford has openly boasted that whatever small costs are imposed by

the contract will be made up with cost cutting elsewhere.

At the same time, shop floor conditions at KTP are reaching the breaking point according to reports from workers who spoke to the WSWs. Workers at the plant have been working without a local agreement for more than five months.

According to the UAW, the unresolved issues were “health and safety in the plant, including minimum in-plant nurse staffing levels and ergonomic issues, as well as Ford’s continued attempts to erode the skilled trades.”

The UAW’s press release came as a surprise to many Ford KTP production workers. “Not a word on the floor,” one worker told the WSWs. “I had a teammate send us the article. Then I saw union members texting that they may get rid of C crew”—an estimated 800 workers—“because of attendance...”

“You know my feelings on the union and how much they actually do versus what they pretend they do,” a veteran KTP worker added. “If it’s a scare tactic [by Ford] then the union is helping play it. If they got rid of a shift with the order bank we have, the rest of us wouldn’t see our families.

“Ford doesn’t care about us so they will expect two crews to fill what three were doing. We never lose a day of production due to attendance issues so I don’t see how one leads to another,” he stated.

Another worker told the WSWs that he had heard about a possible strike but that “no one knows anything,” and he had “only read about the strike on social media, on Facebook.”

According to the UAW, there are 19 other local contract agreements that have not been settled at Ford and several more at General Motors and Stellantis. Local agreements usually cover plant specific issues. However, it is quite common for the UAW to drag out negotiations over local agreements for years.

It is also a common practice for the UAW to agree to regressive provisions in local contracts as a means of whipsawing workers plant by plant into a race to the bottom.

The 2023 UAW-Ford national agreement includes an “administrative letter” signed by UAW Vice President Browning, which says that to “enhance competitiveness” and “improve job security,” the parties agreed that “it may be beneficial for local unions and local management to consider and implement innovative programs, pilot projects, experiments or other changes.” To facilitate and encourage such changes, the letter continues, “it may be necessary to change or waive certain provisions of the 2023 Collective Bargaining Agreement, supplemental agreements and appropriate local agreements at such locations.”

The UAW also has a history of using local strikes as a means of militant posturing and letting off steam. This is what happened during the three-day “Hollywood strike” at Stellantis Kokomo Casting plant in Indiana in September 2022, Shawn Fain’s home local. While the plant made critical parts for Stellantis vehicles, the UAW called the walkout on a weekend and ended it before there was any significant impact on production.

A worker in the paint department said she had not heard anything about a possible strike either. She reported that there have been firings and workers are being moved around to different areas and many are being forced to do the jobs of two people. Workers are getting so “worn out physically” that they are “staying home” from work. Breaks are so short that workers “have to walk to the big house” to get to their cars and by then the break is over. “We don’t get lunch or anything,” she said.

Once the local union reaches an agreement with Ford, the workers will be given “highlights” another worker said. “Normally the highlights are only the positive,” he added, noting that nothing in local agreements that will negatively affect workers is ever revealed ahead of the vote.

A veteran worker, told the WSWs that when he first heard about a possible strike he thought it was just a rumor. On Friday night, he said that the overwhelming response to the announcement among coworkers was one of shock. Some agreed that it was only posturing by the union. He stated that “there is no way we’re going to go on strike over a local contract” because “that’s never happened.”

He had heard that two open questions were holding up an agreement, the question of maintenance electricians’ jobs and the question of nurse staffing.

He explained that a typical work area with a small team of workers requires maintenance electricians to keep the line running. Normally, there are two electricians assigned to a given area, one on each side. Now Ford wants to cut down the number of electricians working each area to one, with a floater assigned to go from area to area as needed to do repairs. The local claims it is trying to put a stop to that plan.

Working alone was a factor in the death of 41-year-old

electrician Ivan Bridgewater III in December 2017. He was found dead on a loading dock at KTP where he was working alone. The UAW-Ford National Joint Health & Safety Committee carried out a drawn-out investigation that ended in a paltry \$37,800 fine for seven safety violations, six of them serious, which Ford then appealed.

Bitter experience with the joint safety committees has shown these are little more than appendages of corporate management aimed at shielding the company from responsibility for death and injury. A new body, consisting of three UAW International Reps and three Ford managers, is being set up to make decisions regarding “continued operations and safety” during “future health crises.”

While Fain claimed he was ending the UAW’s program of union-management collusion, the 2023 contract he negotiated further expanded the web of joint committees tying the UAW to the hip of management. One new innovation was the Joint Public Health Emergency Committee, which is aimed at preventing wildcat strikes over safety and health issues like those that took place at a number of auto plants in March 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic.

Workers rebelled against the UAW’s collusion with management to cover up illnesses and deaths and keep production going at all costs, forcing a two-month closure of the industry and saving countless lives.

The UAW cannot be entrusted with the defense of safe and healthy working conditions. A genuine defense of health and safety requires direct oversight and control by workers on the shop floor. That means building and expanding the network of rank-and-file committees through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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