

UAW forces through contract maintaining poverty wages at Sandusky, Ohio Ventra auto parts plant

Nate Rodshaw
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After announcing last-minute deal blocking a strike at the Ventra auto parts plant in Sandusky, Ohio, the United Auto Workers announced ratification of a new contract after a snap vote September 6.

Ventra, a subsidiary of Tier 1 auto parts supplier Flex-N-Gate, employs 1,120 workers at the Sandusky plant located roughly halfway between Toledo and Cleveland. The company has additional facilities in Michigan, Kansas, Kentucky and Ontario, Canada. The owner of Flex-N-Gate, Shahid Khan, has a reported net wealth of \$12.1 billion, making number 55 in the Forbes list of richest Americans.

The Sandusky plant produces headlights and taillights for the Ford F-150 pickup truck. The plant is a strategic choke point as it supplies the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan, and the Ford Kansas City plant. Both plants produce the F-150, Ford's top profit maker.

The leadership of UAW Local 1216 at the plant did everything it could to block a fight, despite the powerful position occupied by Ventra workers in the supply chain. Instead of preparing an all-out strike, Local 1216 kept workers largely in the dark as it allowed the company to impose long hours of overtime in order to stockpile parts to prepare for a strike.

"No one wants a strike," Nick Nemitz, president and chair of UAW Local 1216, told Local 13 News in the runup to the contract expiration. He added, "For the last several years under the current agreement, with economics being what they are, inflation rising the cost of grocery and utilities, the workers have been left behind as far as competitive wages. We internally have done a poll, and roughly 65-68 percent of our workers are having to work more than one job, in some cases two or three jobs, to make ends meet."

What a staggering admission of failure! By the union's own account, two-thirds of the workers they "represent" depend on a second or third source of income. And under these conditions, "no one wants a strike"? Nemitz clearly speaks not on behalf of the workers that are struggling to

make ends meet. He is speaking as a representative of the parasitic layer of bureaucrats that function as a cheap labor contractor for the company.

On Friday, August 30, as the expiration of the contract came closer, the UAW released a video declaring "UAW Local 1216 members are ready to stand up!" Within hours the union announced that a tentative agreement was reached. The agreement came just over 24 hours before the expiration of the contract at 11:59 p.m. on Saturday, August 31.

In announcing the agreement on Facebook, Local 1216 stated, "A Tentative Agreement has been reached between Local 1216 and Ventra Sandusky. Roll-Out and a Ratification vote to occur next Friday, September 6th with Time and Place TBD." Despite a flood of calls from workers, on the shop floor and social media, the union remained silent on the details.

A few comments from workers highlight the boiling anger over the last-minute deal and snap vote ordered by the UAW.

"Our bargaining committee should not be putting this out until membership gets a chance to see the tentative contract!"

"We need to see it now!"

"Why don't we get to see the proposal?"

"No waiting til next week. We need to see it now! We need the time to decide. And look it over. Stop keeping everything to the last minute on things."

Another posted, "Why can't we see the 'highlights' on Tuesday?? You can't expect us to have the roll out and vote the same day!! Same stuff as last time! Feels rushed! This is too important to rush thru and not have time to process and ask questions on things!"

Eventually, the three-and-a-half page "highlights" were posted on Wednesday, September 4, followed by the full Tentative Agreement, which was posted on September 5, less than 24 hours before the vote.

The vote to ratify, far from a vote of confidence in the

UAW leadership, was more a reflection of the evident bankruptcy of the UAW and its incapability and unwillingness to advance the interests of those they supposedly represent. While the new contract offers modest wages gains, 31.5 percent over 4 years for most workers, the raises do not make up for previous losses due to inflation, let alone put workers ahead.

For workers earning the present starting poverty wage of \$20.15 an hour, pay will only rise to \$26.50 by 2028, hardly enough to support a family.

There are no guarantees on job security. Rather, the “highlights” assert, “The company retains the sole right to manage its business including but not limited to, the right to determine the labor requirements to hire direct, assign, recall, transfer and promote, to make and revise shift schedules, determine starting and quitting times and hours of work, to determine the number and classification of employees to be utilized.”

One worker summed up the situation well, “What’s been done over the last 21 years is the company (Visteon/ACH/Ventra) says there is no money/ profit for anything so they offer garbage. We get upset. We ask about striking and 1216 says we can’t because international says we can’t. I’ve also been told many times our contract didn’t allow strikes. So, we have a garbage counter offer and 1216 tells us its actually great and we should take it because they can’t ask for more. We get more upset. Then we are told the company will close us down if we don’t take it. Some people in vulnerable financial situations panic. Then they decide to accept it out of fear...”

The sellout of the Sandusky Ventra workers follows a well worn pattern. In 2022 Ventra workers at the Evert, Michigan, plant formed a rank-and-file committee in advance of the expiration of their contract. The Ventra Evert Workers Rank-and-File Committee issued statements and led the opposition to the UAW-Ventra conspiracy. Workers at the plant overwhelmingly defeated the first tentative agreement and voted for strike action.

In 2020 the UAW kept workers on the job without a contract for months during the height of the pandemic despite a vote by workers to decisively reject a pay cut negotiated by the union.

However, the UAW refused to call a strike while it wore workers down with endless drawn-out negotiations. While a sellout contract was ultimately passed under conditions of lies and intimidation on the part of the union and the company alike, the workers went through a critical experience in the organization and mobilization of their independent strength. Workers at the Sandusky plant should follow the lead of their brothers and sisters in Evert and other parts plants like the Dakkota plant in Chicago.

Dakkota Integrated SystemAt plant in theChicago striking workers voted down four sellout contracts brought back by the UAW before a contract was pushed through under dubious circumstances.

Meanwhile, following the supposedly “historic” contract negotiated by UAW President Shawn Fain with the Big Three after a phony “stand-up” strike that left most production going, the auto companies have carried out a wave of mass firings and layoffs, without serious opposition from the UAW. This includes the announced layoff of an additional 2,450 workers at the Stellantis Warren Truck plant north of Detroit.

While a new contract has been ratified by Sandusky Ventra workers, it will not take long for the false claims by the UAW to be exposed. As the workers inevitably come into conflict with the company and their ostensible representatives in UAW Local 1216, they will need a new type of organization to fight.

Workers are not simply in a struggle against Ventra, but they are also fighting against the pro-corporate UAW leaders. However, they are in a powerful position with potential allies in workers all over the world as part of a global system of auto production. Flex-N-Gate itself has operations in 12 countries, including the US, Canada, Mexico, China, France, Japan and India.

Sandusky Ventra workers should follow the example of workers at Dakkota and other auto plants and form their own rank-and-file committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to put the power in the hands of workers on the shop floor and link up with workers in Evert, throughout Ventra, Flex-N-Gate, across the auto parts industry and beyond.



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