Volkswagen Chattanooga workers vote to authorize strike, but UAW pleads for Volkswagen to continue talks

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Workers at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, members of the United Auto Workers (UAW), voted in favor of strike authorization this week following the posting by management of its so-called "final offer." The margin was substantially above the minimum two-thirds majority required to authorize a strike under the UAW constitution, the union said, but UAW officials did not release the exact totals.

The union called management's offer "inadequate" and submitted its own counteroffer in response. However, after more than one year of fruitless negotiations for a first contract since winning union recognition in April 2024, the UAW has set no strike deadline and details of its counterproposal are sketchy. Management's final offer, posted on online, contained a wage proposal that would leave workers at the end of the four-year deal substantially behind workers at the Detroit automakers. The terms of that contract fell well short of what workers needed to make up for decades of UAW givebacks throughout the auto industry, let alone put them ahead.

The union rejected the proposal, citing weak job security guarantees and the need for improvements in healthcare but has pleaded with management to continue talks. VW's final offer included significant health insurance premiums and co-pays.

"Job security," in UAW doublespeak, means lowering labor costs through cuts to wages and working conditions to boost corporate profitability and competitiveness. However, none of the concessions contracts negotiated by the union over the past decades "saved" a single job. This policy instead has left a trail of closed plants and devastated communities in its wake. UAW membership has fallen from a peak of 1.5 million in 1979 to around 375,000 today.

It is therefore significant that the UAW is not demanding wages equal to Ford, GM and Stellantis in the VW negotiations, an enormous cost savings to management that undercuts Big Three workers. Nor has it addressed the status of temporary and contract workers, who earn wages far below those of regular, full-time workers and have no rights under the terms of management's proposal. The UAW appears ready to accept the permanent sub-tier of casual workers at the plant, who can be pitted against full-time workers.

The union is not even taking the elementary step of demanding the contract expiration align with the Detroit automakers, undermining solidarity and weakening the position of both VW workers and workers at the US-based car companies.

At the same time, Volkswagen has adopted the bulk of the corporatist language contained in the terms of contracts with the Detroit automakers, tying the UAW at the hip to corporate management. Volkswagen has long experience with the IG Metall union in Germany in the running of so-called Works Councils that serve to completely subordinate workers to diktats of management, suppressing worker militancy while working to impose huge cuts to jobs and conditions.

Volkswagen had been stymied from imposing a similar set up in the United States due to laws still on the books against company unions. But in 2014 the UAW offered its services to VW to help set up a works council in exchange for union recognition. It signed an agreement utterly subordinating the union to the company's drive for profit, declaring it would help in "maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages

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[Volkswagen] enjoys relative to its competitors in the United States and North America."

However, workers saw no reason to join a union that openly identified itself with corporate management and voted decisively against union recognition at the time. Another attempt by the UAW in 2019 also failed.

While the rhetoric of the UAW may have changed under the administration of UAW President Shawn Fain, the essential pro-corporate and nationalist policy of the UAW apparatus remains the same as under the previous gang of corrupt, company operatives. The UAW under Fain completely identifies its interests with those of corporate management and the American capitalist state.

This is most graphically demonstrated by the full support that Fain has given to the fascist Trump's program of tariffs. While Fain falsely claims the tariffs are designed to protect the jobs of American workers, in reality they are aimed at building a Fortress American in preparation for global war against China and other US economic rivals. Fain has offered the services of the UAW apparatus to impose war-time labor discipline on workers. Modeled on the so-called Arsenal of Democracy alliance of the UAW with the Roosevelt administration during World War II, this included a union-enforced ban on strikes and the jailing of socialists.

Workers need organization. But they need genuine fighting rank-and-file based organizations, not bureaucratized unions wedded to corporate interests. This means building rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to the workers on the shop floor. Affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), these committees will also fight for the global unification of autoworkers.

Volkswagen reported a $1.5 billion loss in the third quarter of 2025, which it attributes to the impact of Trump's tariffs and the shift away from EV production at Porsche. The company said it expects another $5.8 billion hit to profits due to tariffs.

Workers should be warned that in Germany the company is currently collaborating with IG Metall in imposing massive cuts of 35,000 out of 120,000 jobs over the next several years. Real wages will be cut by up to 18 percent. This is being deemed a "success" by the union.

This is only a small part of a global jobs bloodbath that is underway in the auto industry as US and European corporations respond to tariffs and challenges of Chinese EV makers by employing AI, automation and other technologies to pump more production out of fewer workers. This week General Motors announced the elimination of 1,200 jobs at its EV plant in Detroit and thousands of temporary layoffs at its Ultium battery plants in Ohio and Tennessee.

VW has been seriously impacted by a chip shortage sparked by the standoff between the US and China over control of global chip maker Nexperia, based in the Netherlands, but under Chinese ownership. Under pressure from the US, the government of the Netherlands took control of Nexperia. Trump is also insisting that the Netherlands replace the company's CEO, who is Chinese, as a condition for easing restrictions.

In an effort to placate Trump, Volkswagen even floated the idea of building a US plant for its Audi subsidiary in Chattanooga.

For VW workers to wage a successful fight they must forge links with workers at GM, Ford and Stellantis, as well as VW workers in Germany who are battling relentless corporate attacks on jobs, pay and working conditions. The nationalist and pro-capitalist program of the UAW blocks such a fight. The defense of jobs means rejecting the fratricidal program of the UAW of pitting of American workers against their class brothers in Mexico, Canada, Europe and Asia and the international unification of the working class based on a socialist program. This means building and expanding the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

To join the fight to build the IWA-RFC, fill out the form below.

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