

Mass opposition from Nexteer auto parts workers to sellout contract pushed by UAW bureaucracy

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The vote on a concessions-laden tentative agreement at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan concluded Thursday morning amid a groundswell of rank-and-file opposition. Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on Wednesday as the vote was underway delivered a devastating verdict on the contract—denouncing its expansion of a two-tier wage system, unaffordable healthcare costs, poverty-level pay for new hires, and the role of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy in imposing it.

As the WSWWS reported last week, the tentative agreement creates a new layer of “third-class employees” among new hires, who would start at \$19.05 an hour—compared to \$22.50 for current workers and \$24.75 for legacy workers hired before May 2021. After four years, wages for new hires would rise only to \$20.89. The deal also sharply increases out-of-pocket healthcare costs for workers hired after May 2021, with weekly contributions for a married couple with children more than doubling from \$26.50 to \$53.34. A workers’ leaflet was being circulated at the plant entitled “Concessions our Leadership fails to tell you.”

“This company is paying five times less wages”

Workers were blunt in their anger. A veteran Nexteer employee with three decades on the job tied the contract’s failures to the broader decay of living standards and the widening gulf between workers and the corporate elite.

“Health care costs are already excessive for new workers because they’re already paying \$25 a week,” he said. “I have been here for 29 years and we aren’t paying anything. They all have families and cost of living is up for everybody. So, I think we all ought to be equal and that’s what the UAW is for. This contract just creates the separation and the gap between the new and older workers.”

His frustration extended to the decades of stagnation in his own wages. “If this contract passes, in four years I’ll be making the exact same amount as I made 20 years ago. Our cost of living hasn’t gone down in 20 years. So how is it I’m making the same amount of money as pay rates 20 years ago when the CEO’s pay doesn’t go down that drastically? We deserve an increase that equals the cost of living.”

The squeeze of rising costs, exacerbated by Trump’s criminal war against Iran, was immediate and personal. “I live 78 miles from here. So I’ve doubled my gas cost every week to go back and forth to work.

It happened overnight. But my pay doesn’t change. Now I just have to budget what I can afford to spend on food, groceries and bills.”

He placed the contract within a broader pattern of corporate plunder. “Twenty years ago, everybody made \$26 an hour. Now, half of the work groups are only going to make \$22, and others are going to get \$27. We had 6,000 employees here in 2006. We’re now down to less than 1,300. So this company is paying five times less wages for less than what they were paying 20 years ago. Their profits have got to be through the roof. But they don’t share it with anybody.”

He was also scathing about the UAW’s role. “The UAW has gone along with it. They give us this, ‘Well, you’re IPS [an Independent Parts Supplier] now, you’re not actual GM.’ So I’ve been here since it was GM, and it’s the same job. Nothing has changed. IPS or nothing, we’re still autoworkers.”

“I always ask every contract, because this is my fifth one, ‘What are we giving up?’ Because they’re asking for something just like us asking for wages and benefits—they’re asking for something, what is it?”

“I voted for the guys in the local union here that said they were going to fight to make changes. And then it seems like they go to the union leadership meetings for a couple dozen times and they come back singing the same song as the guy before them.”

“You have to do a lot of overtime just to make ends meet”

A young Nexteer worker described conditions for newer employees as a grinding daily struggle. “It’s easy to see why they can’t keep people on the job. I’ve seen five people who have either been fired or left after several months because they don’t pay competitively. You’re not going to be motivated when everything going around you is negative.”

He described management routinely flouting even the limited protections in the existing contract. “On my shift we have a ninth hour that’s always a possibility. But we’re supposed to be told by the end of the third break if we are being nine-houred or not. The way they get around that is they just tell us on a Monday that all week we’re ninth-hour and maybe we’ll send you home early. So we have to sit there and wait and it can be like five minutes before the end of the day and they can go, ‘Yeah, just to let you know you are ninth-hour still,’ even though in the contract it states they tell us well before.

“There are workers with seven years making only \$21 an hour. Everyone’s starting right now at \$19 and that is just not a living wage. You have to do a lot of overtime just to make ends meet. I work anywhere from nine hours on a regular shift to 14 or 16 hours a night. So I spend most of my day here and then on the weekend, it’s just trying to stay home and not spend much money.”

Despite this, he expressed a combative outlook. “I’m hoping we’ll get to a point soon that people will start realizing how bad the situation is and start doing something about it. It’s coming to the point that we will have to strike to get what we need. Everyone who’s doing something vital should have pay that they can get by and live comfortably and not be struggling like so many of us are.”

Workers who wrote into the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* were equally unsparing. “Our union doesn’t know how to negotiate or even represent the people,” one wrote. “There really isn’t such a thing as a grievance any more. The employer doesn’t have to pay out for any wrongdoing. I think we need to do another white T-shirt and do a sit-down strike.”

Another worker complained: “Today was the first day of voting on a tentative agreement at local 699 in Saginaw. When I went in to vote as I walked out, some of the bargaining committee were greeting people at the door. This is so wrong for them to be there when we’re voting.”

A key node in the auto supply chain

A strike at Nexteer’s Saginaw facility would not be a local affair. The plant is a critical supplier of steering systems to some of the most profitable vehicles in North America. Production stoppages would rapidly cascade across the industry.

Vehicles dependent on Saginaw-produced steering systems include the Ford F-150 and F-150 Lightning EV, the Ford Mustang, Bronco and Escape; General Motors Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra—the best-selling trucks in the country—as well as the GMC Hummer EV, Cadillac Escalade, Cadillac XT6, Chevrolet Traverse and Buick Enclave; and Stellantis’s Ram 1500, Dodge Charger, Dodge Challenger, Jeep Grand Cherokee and Jeep Avenger.

International models including the BMW 1-Series, Fiat 500 and Linea, BYD Song Pro/Plus, Chery Tiggo 8 PHEV and Zeekr 001 EV also depend on components produced here.

This is precisely why the UAW bureaucracy is working so hard to prevent a strike. The leverage that Nexteer workers possess is immense—which makes the bureaucracy’s determination to suppress it all the more deliberate and calculated.

At the same time, workers pointed out that Nexteer has moved many operations to lower-wage countries, including Mexico and Poland. “If we strike, they can just ship everything out. They’ve already pretty much turned plants four and seven into ghost towns,” one worker said.

This points to the need for building international solidarity. The veteran worker recounted a formative conversation with a woman who had trained workers in Mexico for Ford parts production. “She said they were happy with what they got when they first got it. But then after they realized what they had to do every day, and then what the company was making, then they realized that they wanted to be unionized and start to get a good daily wage.

“I talked to a few guys and they believed that we should get rid of the border thing and unite nations together and create a workforce that’s all unified across the borders and that would stop a lot of these corporations moving to third world countries and making more billions and billions of dollars.”

Asked about Trump’s war against Iran, the veteran worker was searching but clear-eyed about who benefits from such conflicts. “I’m not real sure what even started the war. I’m sure it’s billionaires needing more money, oil and things of that nature. I’d like to have more information out there, the truth, not just what they want you to hear.”

He also denounced the scapegoating of immigrant workers. “The immigrants come over here because we fought for what we have. But we don’t realize how much the billionaires create the divisions between us and cause people to fight people. We don’t have any idea why we’re fighting. We’re just killing you and I from over there, even though we’re common workers just trying to protect what they have. And the billionaires are just calling the shots. If workers got together that would end the pitting of us against each other.”

“It’s always been the gap between the rich and the poor that has just been outrageous. And they talk a lot of game in election times, what they want to do, what they’re going to do, but I never see anything change. I still see the enormous gap.”

The young worker echoed the call for international unity. “If we’re working for the same company, share a lot of resources and our economies are so close to each other, it’s crazy that we’re not working together. Why not support each other and try to make the best out of the situation instead of being pitted against each other?”

Last week, Will Lehman—a Mack Trucks worker running for UAW president—called on Nexteer workers to reject the contract and establish rank-and-file committees to ensure vote integrity, prepare for strike action under the direct control of workers, and extend solidarity to auto parts workers striking in Findlay, Ohio, and throughout Mexico.

The mass opposition among Nexteer workers to this contract reflects a broader awakening. Workers are drawing connections—between their poverty wages and the fortunes being accumulated at the top, between their local struggle and the wars being fought on the other side of the world in the name of “billionaires needing more money,” and between their own fight and that of workers in Mexico and beyond. The task now is to transform that opposition into organized, independent action under the democratic control of the workers themselves.

We urge Nexteer workers to contact the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter and discuss building a rank-and-file committee.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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