

# Unifor names Ford as its pattern-setting “partner” for auto contracts in Canada

Carl Bronski  
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Unifor President Lana Payne announced earlier this month that the union has chosen Ford Motor Canada as its preferred candidate to begin negotiations on a new “pattern” contract covering the 16,000 auto workers under the union’s jurisdiction at the Detroit Three auto companies. Master Bargaining negotiations are scheduled to begin on June 22. Unifor organizes some 5,000 workers across Ford’s Canadian facilities, the majority of whom are on extended lay off.

In explaining its decision, Unifor extolled its “longstanding and productive working relationship with the Ford Motor Company.” A Ford spokesman was quick to agree, telling CBC News, in words almost identical to the union’s statement, that the company “has a strong, long-term relationship with Unifor.” Indeed, in the run-up to the decision, Ford executives lobbied to be the lead company in the pattern-setting exercise.

Autoworkers will not be surprised at the amicable business relationship the auto bosses and the union enjoy at their expense. They know from bitter experience over the past four decades that the Unifor bureaucracy (and its predecessor in the Canadian Autoworkers/CAW) has no interest in defending their jobs or working conditions. Rather their overriding concern is working with management and the state to ensure that the automakers turn a handsome profit in Canada and that they can maintain a steady stream of dues income to finance their bloated salaries and expense accounts.

Since 1985 when union officials split from the UAW in order to launch a nationalist CAW that has allowed the auto bosses to pit American workers against their class brothers and sisters in Canada by whipsawing concession contracts back and forth across the border, nine Detroit Three assembly and engine plants in Canada have been closed with tens of thousands of jobs eliminated. For decades, concession contracts have been the order of the day in union-company contract negotiations in the US and in Canada. An inferior and divisive two-tier wages and benefits system has been institutionalized, the defined pension plan eliminated, eight-hour-day and overtime work rules obliterated, and line speed-ups increased. Low-wage temporary part-time positions have proliferated even as the pockets of the auto executives and shareholders continue to bulge.

Workers will not soon forget how Unifor, in line with its nationalist-corporatist perspective, worked overtime in 2023 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 while the UAW agreed to a four-year deal, thereby decoupling the contract expiration in Canada and the US for

years to come.

Soon after the last contract was settled in late 2023—also with the pattern set by Ford—some 3,200 workers at the company’s giant assembly plant in Oakville, Ontario were laid off. They have yet to return to work. Ford has been promised a \$465 million handout from the federal government that will possibly in seven or eight months restore jobs for only 1,800 workers. During the 2023 contract ratification process, thousands of workers were told to expect only an 8-month shutdown. Even then, the deal only passed by a narrow 54 percent vote, with a majority rejection in Oakville and a rejection by skilled trades across Ford’s Canadian operations.

Stellantis has also placed thousands of workers at its Canadian operations on layoffs. Starting soon after the 2023 bargaining round, the 3,500-strong workforce at its Windsor Assembly plant were hit by sporadic layoffs as the company began to establish separate lines for EV, hybrid and internal combustion engine vehicle production. By January 2025 the plant was scaled back to a rotating schedule of one- and two-shift weeks. Only in January 2026 did management re-start full round-the-clock production.

At Stellantis’ Brampton Assembly plant, workers were expected to be on layoff for much of the length of the three-year 2023 contract, with a shutdown for retooling beginning in early 2024. However, as a result of Stellantis’ decision to shift production of the “promised” Jeep Compass model to production lines in Illinois, all 3,200 workers are now indefinitely laid off.

At GM’s operations, job losses continue to mount. At its Oshawa assembly operation, some 3,000 workers, many of whom have been labouring on the inferior second-tier wage scale, saw the end of the third shift last January resulting in the loss of 750 jobs (and about 2,000 auto parts supplier jobs). At GM’s Propulsion plant in St. Catharines, the workforce has been cut in half and now sits at 600 workers as the company has delayed a scheduled EV refit until at least 2027. And at the GM-CAMI electric vehicle plant in Ingersoll, after years of significant layoffs that forced many workers to turn to food banks, the plant was permanently mothballed in 2025 destroying more than 1,000 jobs.

The 2026 contract negotiations are taking place under conditions of a vast global restructuring of the auto industry, bound up with trade war, rearmament and developing global war and the halting transition to electric vehicles. As the contract talks begin, the US-Mexico-Canada trade agreement, large parts of which Trump has effectively abrogated, is supposed to be subject to renegotiation. However, Washington is focusing on reaching a bilateral deal with Mexico, which has become much more critical for the operations of the Detroit Three than Canada.

Workers are bearing the brunt of the global restructuring drive, which corporate bosses are carrying out with the connivance of union bureaucracies in Europe and North America. Governments around the world are systematically orchestrating the transformation of civilian industry to military production, while the conflicts between the imperialist powers to secure markets, raw materials and strategic influence are compelling sweeping cuts to auto production.

Unifor's strategy, both long-term—i.e. the nationalist-corporatist course it pursued through and since the split—and in response to the need to “decarbonize” has produced a disaster. Union officials claimed they had secured a place for Canadian capitalism in the emerging global electric vehicle industry, by closely collaborating with the auto bosses, and the federal Liberal and Ontario Progressive Conservative governments. They offered up concessions and shilled for subsidies, only to have the rug pulled out from underneath them by Trump's trade war and removal of EV incentives and subsidies.

Unifor's response has been to double down on its nationalist-protectionist program and integrate itself even more with the Canadian state. In the name of defending “Canadian jobs,” it advocates Canada aggressively pursue trade war against China and the US, while seeking to convince the automakers to retain production and make investments by pointing to the profitability of their Canadian operations, due to years of concessions and “downsizing.”

After the announcement by Payne on the selection of Ford to negotiate the 2026 pattern agreement, it was left to John D'Agnolo, Master Bargaining Chair and since 2017, the President of Unifor's Local 200, to elaborate on the union's bargaining scheme. The local organizes Ford workers at two Windsor engine plants. D'Agnolo, attempting to prepare the membership for yet another round of concession contracts, told the *Windsor Star* that workers mustn't expect too much in any trade-off for corporate investment. “You can negotiate all the bells and whistles, but if you're not at work, you don't get any of it.”

Of course, for D'Agnolo and the rest of the Unifor bureaucracy, the so-called “bells and whistles” to be sacrificed means basic worker demands for an end to the two-tier system, recovery of ever dwindling benefits packages, a restoration of a defined pensions program, a wage increase that exceeds the inflationary erosion of compensation and an end to onerous shift scheduling, speed-up and mandatory overtime provisions.

D'Agnolo is notorious amongst rank and file workers, particularly for his role in the 2023 contract “ratification” at Ford. At that time, the Unifor pattern barely passed with the support of just 54 percent and was rejected outright by skilled trades workers and production workers at Oakville Assembly. When it became clear that the vote would be close, accusations arose that D'Agnolo 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 longstanding practice which gave them a veto.

And in the 2020 contract “ratification” vote at Ford, crucial issues negatively affecting workers were hidden from the membership during a perfunctory “contract highlights” meeting. Only after electronic voting closed did details of major concessions agreed to behind workers' backs appear in the *Detroit Free Press*. In the deal, Unifor effectively surrendered the hallowed principles of the eight-hour day and overtime pay provisions through an undisclosed Alternative Work Schedule (AWS) agreement. In addition, the union had also agreed to a scheme to create a large third tier of workers on the shop floor by

flooding the auto plants with a new wave of temporary part-time workers.

The critical lesson to be drawn from this entire 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.

Already, the struggle to build rank and file committees among autoworkers has taken root in auto assembly and parts plants in the United States. This fight is best exemplified in the campaign of Will Lehman for the presidency of the United Autoworkers in the membership vote to be held later this year. A rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker from Pennsylvania, Lehman is running in the UAW on a socialist program to abolish the union bureaucracy and place power back in the hands of workers on the shop floor.

Lehman opposes the nationalist-protectionist policies of both the UAW and Unifor, which divide workers, for the benefit of the auto bosses, and corral them behind their “own” governments in trade war and the developing global war.

He is a leading representative of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which exists to coordinate workers' struggles around the world in opposition to the globally organized auto corporations. The IWA-RFC fights to unify autoworkers in Canada with their fellow workers in the US, Mexico and internationally, alongside all workers entering into struggle amid the skyrocketing cost of living due to the criminal US/Israeli war on Iran. Its starting point is the conception that workers on the shop floor must take back control from the nationalist, pro-capitalist union bureaucracies, and take up a struggle for what workers need, not what the corporate bosses and their buddies in government claim is affordable. This means a fight against capitalist austerity and war, and to put human need before private profit.



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