

Nexteer workers say UAW bargaining committee is installing management-paid loyalists to oversee ratification vote

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Hours before 1,700 workers at the Nexteer Automotive plant in Saginaw, Michigan began to vote on a fourth tentative agreement (TA4), rank-and-file workers report that United Auto Workers Local 699 bargaining committee officials have seized control of the vote oversight process. They have reportedly replaced Election Committee members who have overseen past ratification votes with hand-picked loyalists paid by the company and excused from work. At the same time, workers say, union officials are coordinating with management to deny release time to any workers known to oppose the contract.

Workers speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* described a systematic effort to rig the ratification process through direct collaboration between the bargaining committee and Nexteer management. “How can the bargaining team pick people to work on the election committee instead of the chairman of the election committee?” one worker wrote online. “Something fishy. Sounds like management has bought this contract.”

Facing a revolt by Nexteer workers, this maneuver is the latest in a series of escalating violations of the membership’s democratic rights. The union repeatedly decided to extend the contract after workers voted down three successive agreements, and refused to authorize a strike after workers voted by 86 percent to walk out. Now, the union is holding the ratification vote inside the plant itself rather than at the union hall, just weeks after UAW officials colluded with management to fire a worker who criticized the union bureaucracy at an in-plant contract rollout meeting.

Despite the efforts to wear down rank-and-file resistance, there is widespread opposition to the fourth TA, which maintains poverty starting wages of \$19.50 an hour and only raises top pay to \$27 an hour by 2030—far less than what workers were making in real terms at the former GM Steering Gear plant in 2005. At the same time, there is deep opposition to the blackmail methods of the UAW bureaucracy. And any deal “ratified” through such a undemocratic vote will be rightly viewed as illegitimate.

Workers report that the Local 699 Election Committee—a body elected by the membership that has traditionally overseen

ratification votes at the local—recognized it lacked sufficient personnel to staff three simultaneous in-plant polling locations: the cafeteria of Plant 7, a meeting room called QAD in Plant 3 and an upstairs location in Plant 4. The splitting of the vote across three separate plant venues, rather than a single location at the union hall, created the pretext for what followed.

The Election Committee moved to recruit volunteers from the membership to assist with checking IDs at the polls and overseeing the vote. But when it submitted its volunteer list to management for release from jobs, the bargaining committee intervened and overturned it, workers reported. “Today, it was overturned by the bargaining team saying that they have gotten their own,” one worker explained. “They got some picked from the floor. Loyal ones.”

Workers who had volunteered and were known opponents of the contract found themselves blocked. “My supervisor said that I wasn’t released. My name wasn’t on the list, he said—so that’s how I found out,” one worker said. “Wow. I’ve never heard of anything like this. This vote should be cancelled and everything done at the union hall.”

The “union must have supplied the list of their people to management,” another worker continued. “And people who aren’t on the list won’t be released by management.” Workers named several colleagues rejected in this way, all known “no” voters.

While the UAW constitution and longstanding practice give local unions broad latitude in how they administer ratification votes, including who oversees them and where they are held, the arrangement at Nexteer has crossed into territory workers describe as unprecedented and flagrantly corrupt.

Legitimately elected Election Committee members, when deployed for union business, are released from their jobs and paid by the union hall through pay vouchers. The bargaining committee’s hand-picked replacements occupy a fundamentally different category: released by management and paid by the company for their full shift.

“Management will say, ‘We’re gonna cover your job today. You’re gonna go up and help run this election.’ And you’re still on company time,” one worker explained. “They’re

getting paid by the company. They're supervising a vote to make sure that it's passed."

Another worker said, "These people probably have never been on the Election Committee or really know what they're doing. They were not elected. They were specifically chosen by the bargaining committee and management."

The constitutional rules governing officer elections prohibit Election Committee members from advocating for any outcome while overseeing a vote. The bargaining committee has imposed no such constraint on itself, the workers explained. "How can you hold the Election Committee people to where they can't say anything, but then your own bargaining chairman can say that he's voting yes? Your shop committee, Chris Christie, told me, 'I'm voting yes,'" one worker said. "So, they're open about how they're voting, but everybody else better be quiet. Or they're gonna get retaliation."

A scheme to finger opponents

Workers drew the direct connection between the override of the Election Committee and the firing of Antwiane Sanders, the Nexteer worker with more than a decade of seniority terminated after he criticized UAW International Servicing Rep Jason Tuck at an in-plant rollout meeting earlier this month.

During the three previous ratification votes at the union hall, rank-and-file workers openly campaigned for the defeat of the contract. With the vote inside the plant, any worker speaking out against the pro-company deal could face the same fate as Sanders.

"By getting management involved, they're targeting every worker who's an opponent of the contract," one worker said. "The union is directly fingering workers for being fired and disciplined, like Antoine—and working with management to make sure that the loyalists to the union apparatus are the ones that get time off work."

Article 49 of the UAW Constitution prohibits "intimidating others by threats or otherwise interfering with a member in the exercise of their right to cast a ballot in Local Union elections and strike balloting." While Sanders was terminated for calling Tuck a "bum," no disciplinary action has been taken by the UAW International against its servicing rep for threatening workers.

During a May 17 meeting at the union hall, Tuck cursed workers for rejecting the contract a second time, threatened them with the closure of the plant and walked out mid-meeting when he failed to intimidate them. During this same meeting, a worker put forward of a motion to hold a strike vote, which was unanimously supported. On May 21, workers voted by 86 percent to strike—a mandate from the membership, which the union apparatus has defied.

"Something is rotten in Saginaw"

Will Lehman, a rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania nominated at last week's UAW Constitutional Convention in Detroit to run for UAW president, has issued an open letter to Nexteer workers condemning the entire proceeding. Lehman, a socialist who first ran for UAW president in 2022 on a platform of transferring power from the bureaucracy to the rank and file, called the in-plant ratification vote this week "not a legitimate vote" but "a shotgun affair designed to silence opposition to a pro-company deal and get the contract passed by whatever means necessary."

Lehman named the architects of the scheme—Local 699, Nexteer management, outgoing Region 1D Director Steve Dawes, International Servicing Rep Jason Tuck and UAW President Shawn Fain—and drew a sharp historical parallel: "Throughout history we have seen such travesties of democratic rights—poll taxes and literacy tests in the Jim Crow South used to deprive African Americans and poor whites of the right to vote; Trump's threats to deploy ICE agents to polling stations during this year's election. What the UAW and management are doing at Nexteer belongs in the same category. This scheme is aimed not at limiting who can vote but at press-ganging workers into voting yes on a deal they have already rejected three times."

Placing the Nexteer struggle within a broader rebellion across the auto parts sector, Lehman wrote: "The UAW bureaucracy is sitting on a powder keg. Your rebellion is part of a growing revolt across the auto parts sector and the broader working class."

Whatever the outcome of the upcoming vote, Lehman warned, the underlying conflict will not be resolved. "There is going to be a struggle at Nexteer over job cuts, speedup and working conditions regardless of what happens this week." He called on workers to expand the rank-and-file committee they have built, so that, in the words of a Nexteer worker, "authority can be transferred from the UAW apparatus to you yourselves."

Workers interested in joining the Nexteer Workers Rank-and-File Committee can contact the committee at nexteerworkersrfc@gmail.com, text (947) 622-2198, or visit tinyurl.com/nexteerrfc. Workers at Nexteer, American Axle, Dana, Bridgewater Interiors and other workplaces who want to contact the WSWs can write to wsws.org/contact.



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