Unifor promotes trade war and Canadian militarism as it rams through "pattern" agreement with General Motors

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Unifor, the union representing some 17,000 auto assembly workers across the Detroit Three's operations in Canada, announced August 31 that it had reached agreement with General Motors management on a contract for some 4,600 workers matching the "pattern" set at Ford Canada this past July.

Canada's largest private-sector union, with over 300,000 members, has been focused this bargaining round with the Detroit Three on finalizing new agreements well ahead of the September 21 expiration date to block any rank-and-file opposition amid a growing crisis driven by the global restructuring of the auto industry and the US-Canada trade war. Under these conditions, the bureaucracy is determined to preserve its corporatist relations with the auto bosses and federal and Ontario governments on the basis of Canadian nationalism. Unifor has extended its full-throated support for the Carney government's retaliatory tariffs against the US and massive rearmament drive.

The negotiations at Ford that set the initial pattern contract and the follow-on deal at GM concluded before the August 21 collapse of trade talks between the Carney government and the Trump administration. Washington's escalation of the trade war threatens the doubling of the current 25 percent tariff on Canadian auto imports to 50 percent beginning on January 1, 2027, unless negotiations re-start and conclude with terms satisfactory to Trump. Already, statements from Carney showed that US negotiators were targeting the planned production of Super Duty trucks slated for the Oakville Ford plant in a late 2026 start-up and the Silverado currently produced at GM's Oshawa facility. Any such move would eventually make production at both plants "uneconomical," said Carney.

Trump's "America first" program aims to crash the Canadian economy, including what remains of its auto industry, in order to reshore production to the US and subordinate Canada as a vassal state as US imperialism escalates world war. Trump's agenda of war and dictatorship is bitterly opposed by millions of workers on both sides of the border, but this opposition finds no expression through the trade union bureaucracies. While Unifor champions Canada's retaliatory tariffs and repeatedly invokes militarist language to describe a supposed "economic war" that Canadian workers should fight hand in hand with their bosses in "Team Canada" against the US, UAW President Shawn Fain has endorsed Trump's tariffs and trade war as a boon for American workers.

The reality is that "America First" protectionism and "Team Canada" nationalism express the interests of competing imperialist powers, both determined to offload the costs of their conflicts onto the working class across the continent. The Canadian ruling class that Unifor backs does not disagree with Trump's policies, large swathes of which they have adopted, but only on the fact that his "America first" program endangers the interests of Canadian imperialism.

Unifor and the UAW's lining up behind their respective ruling classes in the trade war is the logical outcome of their promotion of reactionary Canadian and American nationalism since the 1985 split from the UAW by the Canadian Auto Workers, Unifor's predecessor, and the defence by both the UAW and Unifor bureaucracies of capitalism.

The disastrous consequences of this course for workers is underscored by the latest agreement imposed by Unifor, which continues more than four decades of givebacks orchestrated by the union bureaucracies in both countries through a vicious race to the bottom. The three-year pattern deal, now ratified at both Ford and GM, and set to come into force September 22, retains inferior and divisive two-tier wage and benefits systems. The historic defined benefit pension plan remains a thing of the past for all but a handful of senior workers, while eight-hour-day and overtime work rules are things of the past as line speed-ups continue. Retiree pension checks, significantly eroded by years of income freezes and inflationary spikes, receive less than a $3 per month increase.

The new contract provides for a pathetic 3 percent wage increase per year, under conditions where official inflation is already at 3 percent and set to climb much higher due to the effects of the trade war. An early retirement offer, meant to reduce top-tier veteran workers to be replaced by low-paid new hires, offers a $50,000 inducement. A $10,000 bonus was offered to eligible workers for ratifying the contract.

The union has now begun talks with Stellantis to impose this framework, with a self-imposed deadline of September 11, under circumstances where the company's Brampton auto assembly plant ended all vehicle production in 2023, laying off some 3,000 workers.

At Ford Oakville, partial re-start of production after a 32-month layoff of all 3,200 workers is promised to begin in late 2026. Only about 1,800 workers are expected to eventually regain employment as production of a new Super Duty pickup truck slowly ramps up. A dubious "path" to full employment for many other laid off workers will only begin in July of 2027. In the Windsor engine plants, the company promised, as always "subject to market conditions," to add a third shift in 2029.

At GM, management committed to a C$360 million investment for the Oshawa assembly facility and "next-generation" production in

2029 at the St. Catherines engine plant. The company, however, did not restore last year's lay off in Oshawa of more than 500 direct workers and some 700 ancillary workers when the third shift was ended. Similarly, the planned investments in St. Catharines will do little to reverse the elimination of about 600 jobs—half the workforce—over the past several years.

Unifor pleaded with GM that a future for the currently mothballed CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario should be a top priority. After a years-long failure by management to attain a viable market for electric commercial vans resulted initially in intermittent periods of layoff and shift-splitting arrangements, all 1,200 remaining workers were indefinitely laid off some 15 months ago.

GM was unwilling to make any product commitment, citing uncertainty around tariffs and trade. All they could offer was to extend the Income Maintenance Plan, which would pay 60 percent of regular wages to laid off workers still listed as union members through to May 1, 2028.

However, union officials announced that they had secured a "formal letter of commitment" that if GM produces a viable bid for the production of a military vehicle in any future tender by the Canadian Armed Forces, the Ingersoll plant would receive "first consideration" for placement of the work.

Prime Minister Mark Carney has already initiated a historic militarization plan by pledging to spend 5 percent of the GDP on the military and related infrastructure by 2035, to be paid for through sweeping public spending austerity. The Liberal government's Defence Industrial Strategy has the goal of producing 70 percent of the military's required equipment in Canada, an economic nationalist agenda like that advocated by Unifor aimed at laying the basis for waging war. Carney and his backers in the financial oligarchy are determined that the additional monies to stoke the Canadian war machine will come from the blood and sweat of the working class in the form of more cuts to public services, public sector jobs, Medicare and other social supports, and the overall living standards of workers from coast to coast.

Displaying its firm support for the course charted by the Liberal government and Canadian big business, Unifor officials are actively promoting Carney's rearmament plans. Union president Lana Payne last winter wrote Industry Minister Melanie Joly: "We are closely monitoring developments on procurement of fighter aircraft and government's efforts to align investment in the sector with a broader industrial strategy. Given our vested interest in the outcome of your ministry's decisions, we are requesting a meeting to discuss priorities for the sector."

Military vehicle production is already growing at Canadian industrial facilities. Roshel's Senator-style armoured combat vehicle, built in Brampton, Ontario, has been supplied in the hundreds to the Ukrainian military since the beginning of the US/NATO-instigated war with Russia. Just last November, ICE placed an expedited order with Roshel for a fleet of 20 of these armoured vehicles to support its fascist-style raids on immigrant communities across the US. Photographs have already shown them appearing on the streets of Minneapolis, where ICE agents shot and killed two people in January.

In London, Ontario, General Dynamics has for decades produced light-armoured vehicles for the Canadian Armed Forces. Over the past decade, the company has fulfilled a lucrative contract with the despotic Saudi Arabian regime to provide 742 vehicles worth $15 billion. So controversial was this project that Unifor officials, who organized workers in the plant, tried to keep the contract with the Saudis "under wraps" until, much to Unifor's embarrassment, then NDP leader Tom Mulcair wielded the information to attack Prime Minister Stephen Harper during a 2015 federal election debate.

But today, Unifor, and the rest of the trade union bureaucracy, no longer have any compunction about openly heralding rapid military re-armament. Their support of the government's military policies goes hand in hand with their decades-long nationalist perspective that divides workers internationally by seeking to convince them that their allies are their "own" bourgeoisie as it rearms to the teeth to pursue its predatory interests in a new redivision of the world.

As part of this worldwide struggle among the great powers for markets, raw materials, and cheap labour, the global auto industry is being reorganized at autoworkers' expense, and with the support of the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions. Unifor in Canada, the UAW in the US and the auto unions in Europe are all complicit in job cuts, production speed-up, plant shutdowns, and attacks on worker rights. Germany's Volkswagen, where the IG Metall union and Social Democrat government of Lower Saxony control a majority on the automaker's supervisory board, has initiated its plan to slash 100,000 jobs across its global operations.

Autoworkers in Canada must respond by uniting with workers in the United States, who are being radicalized and moving into struggle against Trump and everything he represents, and with their class brothers and sisters in Mexico and internationally.

The most conscious expression of the upsurge of working-class opposition to war, dictatorship, job losses, and deteriorating living standards is the campaign for UAW president of socialist autoworker Will Lehman. Lehman advocates a rebellion of the rank and file against the bureaucracy through the building of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees to put power on the shop floor and abolish the union apparatus. He calls for the unification of workers in the US with their class brothers and sisters in Canada, Mexico, and around the world to counterpose an international strategy for workers' power to the global onslaught on autoworkers and the entire working class by the ruling elite.

Canadian autoworkers should support Lehman's fight and develop cross-border ties through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Workers across North America must advance their independent class interests by adopting a socialist-internationalist programme and fighting together for the establishment of workers governments that put social needs before private profit by transforming the banks and key industries like auto into public utilities under workers' control.