

UAW balks at solidarity action as Canadian auto talks continue

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After a Sunday meeting with Unifor President Jerry Dias, United Auto Workers (UAW) President Dennis Williams told reporters Monday that despite offering his “support” to Unifor in their current contract discussions with General Motors Canada, he declined to commit to any specific action by American autoworkers should Unifor strike Canadian GM plants in Oshawa and St. Catharines, Ontario.

The Canadian union has selected General Motors as the target company in contract negotiations with the Detroit Three auto companies. Traditionally, the autoworkers’ union chooses an initial company with which to negotiate that then sets the “pattern” for subsequent agreements with the remaining automakers. Contracts for some 23,000 Canadian autoworkers at GM, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler Automotive (FCA) expire on September 19.

A strike by the 4,000 workers at two GM Canada installations—in the event that the strike is of some length—could slow production at several assembly facilities in the United States. This would most likely be the case if management is not able to utilize extra capacity in its American plants to make up lost production, in particular of the V6 and V8 engines built at the St. Catharines facility.

Auto analysts have pointed out that GM maintains enough redundant capacity in American powertrain plants to absorb, with very little additional costs, any reduced volume out of St. Catharines. As for production at the Oshawa assembly facilities, makers of GM’s only high-selling product in Canada, the Equinox, the vehicle is also produced at GM’s CAMI Ingersoll plant (CAMI workers have a separate contract that does not expire until 2017). Local Unifor officials at CAMI have announced that in the event of a strike, they will not disrupt their own production of the

Equinox, but will merely undertake to refrain from extra work. In any case, the model can be produced in Spring Hill, Tennessee, and in Mexico as well.

A refusal, however, by American autoworkers to perform the “extra work” required would greatly strengthen the hand of their class brothers and sisters in Canada. But such action is anathema to the UAW, which like Unifor is an anti-working class organization that is tied through a web of corporatist relationships to the auto companies and is directly dependent on management for a large portion of its finances.

Further, having imposed a sellout contract on a rebellious American workforce in 2015, the last thing Williams wants to encourage is a militant and effective struggle by Canadian autoworkers.

Asked directly if he would order his membership to refuse to make up for lost Canadian output, Williams stated, “I don’t want to comment on that because I don’t know what it will bring us.” If GM asked the UAW to help make up lost production, Williams said, “We’ll have discussions with General Motors and tell them how dissatisfied we are.”

Williams’s statements flatly contradict Dias’s prediction that the UAW “would respect any action” of the Canadian union by restricting extra work south of the border. In any event, Dias’s choice of GM as the union’s initial target company for the pattern settlement—the company at which the membership has the least leverage—has sent a strong signal to all three Detroit automakers that the union is set to impose significant concessions.

GM Canada President Stephen Carlisle has insisted that no new investment decisions will be made for its Canadian operations until the conclusion of contract bargaining. The automaker’s transparent aim is to use the threat of massive job losses to extort concessions,

pitting workers in Canada against their class brothers and sisters in the US and Mexico. For his own part, whilst claiming the possibility of a “dust up” in Oshawa, Dias has stated, “I don’t think there is going to be a strike. I think GM is going to work with us toward a solution.”

Currently, some 2,500 jobs at the company’s Oshawa complex are at risk (as well as financing of an underfunded pension program) as GM seeks to reposition its global operations. The Consolidated Line, which currently produces the Chevrolet Equinox and has narrowly avoided closure on several occasions over the past decade, has no new product scheduled after 2017. The Flex Line plant, which produces the poor-selling Buick Regal, Chevrolet Impala and Cadillac XTS, is also threatened. That line already lost 1,000 jobs last year when Camaro production was transferred to Michigan. The union is also looking for renewed investment commitments for the St. Catharines operation.

There is a long history of united struggles by Canadian and US workers. All the earliest struggles of US autoworkers won a massive response from Canadian workers (and vice-versa) who recognized they were fighting against the same bosses. Meanwhile, every effort to unite with workers in the US was bitterly resisted by the Canadian ruling class, which invariably evoked Canadian nationalism and anti-communism.

The nationalist perspective of the Canadian Autoworkers—CAW (now Unifor)—and their counterparts south of the border culminated in the 1985 split of the UAW along national lines. It has borne bitter fruit for workers on both sides of the border. The auto companies are well versed in using the divisions created between American and Canadian workers to their own advantage.

Unifor’s promotion of economic nationalism dovetails with the promotion by the UAW of protectionist policies in the United States. This perspective has proven utterly disastrous for autoworkers and for communities dependent on the auto industry. It has served to pit Canadian, Mexican and American autoworkers against each other in a never-ending whipsawing drive to lower wages and benefits and destroy working conditions for all sections of workers

The role of Unifor in Canada and the UAW in the US is to divide workers against each other, aiding the companies in pitting them in a fratricidal competition to continuously slash wages and benefits.

There is no separate Canadian or US road to defend autoworkers against the attacks of the globally organized auto giants. The unity of US, Canadian, Mexican, Asian, Latin American and European workers is possible only by building new organizations of industrial and political struggle that reject the nationalist and pro-capitalist programs of the unions and their political subordination to the parties of big business.

Canadian autoworkers, like their brothers and sisters in the US, will resist the inevitable attempt by Unifor to impose a sellout agreement tailored to the needs of management. But a fight to defend jobs and living standards requires a rebellion against Unifor and the formation of rank-and-file factory committees to unite autoworkers not only across auto plants in Canada, but also in the US and internationally, in a common struggle against the corporations and their own treacherous unions, which function as junior partners of the auto bosses.



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