

Unifor maintains blackout on talks with Stellantis as Sunday strike deadline approaches

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Are you an autoworker in Canada? We want to hear from you. Click here to fill out the form at the end of this article to tell us what you're fighting for and let us know your thoughts on Unifor's determined efforts to keep workers in the dark about what they're discussing with the auto bosses.

The Unifor union apparatus has maintained an almost complete blackout on talks with Stellantis as an 11:59 p.m. strike deadline Sunday quickly approaches. The bureaucracy's aim is to bamboozle a majority of the more than 8,200 workers into voting for the pattern sellout, which the bureaucracy has rammed through at Ford and GM. To prevent this, workers at Stellantis must seize control of the contract struggle from the Unifor bureaucracy by establishing rank-and-file committees in each plant, placing power in the hands of workers on the shop floor.

More than a week after announcing the opening of talks and setting a strike deadline, Unifor released its first "bargaining update" to the workers. The document made clear that its focus is two pronged: forcing through its rotten Detroit Three "pattern" at Stellantis over workers' opposition; and expanding dues collection to the company's NextStar Battery Plant, currently under construction in Windsor, Ontario.

Further, the update reports that members of the union bargaining team were set to meet with Stellantis executives on Thursday and Friday to review plans for the transition to electric vehicle production. The Brampton assembly plant is set to undergo a transition to electric vehicle production next year. Plans remain unclear for the Etobicoke Casting Plant, which currently employs 189 hourly workers building traditional internal combustion and hybrid engines.

The pattern, which Unifor President Lana Payne has boasted is "historic" and "life-changing," is a three-year wage freeze when inflation is taken into account. The contract includes a 10 percent increase in the first year followed by 2 percent and 3 percent wage raises in years two and three respectively.

Given the extensive planned retoolings for EV production at most Detroit Three facilities, many workers will receive just 70 percent of their expected wages through supplementary unemployment benefit (SUB) payments for a significant portion of the life of the contract. Furthermore, the pattern does not eliminate the hated multi-tier wage system, but entrenches it in a new four-year wage progression. Nor does it provide for job protection in the EV transition, allowing the companies to slash jobs while retooling plants.

The deal was forced through in a sham online ratification vote at Ford last month by just 54 percent, with the bureaucracy overriding a rejection by skilled trades workers in violation of the union's own rules. Unifor bureaucrats also encouraged low paid temporary part time (TPT) workers to register and vote after a union-set deadline had long passed. The rigged ratification process included a single online ratification meeting, where only those bureaucrats supporting the contract could speak. The online voting process cut out those who did not provide valid emails and reportedly resulted in ballots being sent to former employees.

Unifor then moved on to GM this month, where they sabotaged a strike by 4,300 workers after just 12 hours. The bureaucracy took advantage of the precarious position of a large number of full-time and part-time TPTs who have been struggling on union-sanctioned poverty wages during the recent years of rampant inflation. By agreeing with GM to convert full-time TPTs with more than a year's seniority to permanent employees on the lowest rung of wage progression, the bureaucracy secured 80.5 percent support for the agreement. The contract allows GM to continue exploiting TPTs for another three years until August 2026. GM skilled trades voted by a narrow 55.9 percent to ratify the deal.

Autoworkers at Stellantis have made their opposition to Unifor's "pattern" sellout clear. More than 600 workers

turned out at a Unifor Local 444 meeting in Windsor last month to express their determination to break the pattern and secure a better deal. The workers also protested the anti-democratic ratification process at Ford, demanding in-person meetings and voting. Given the strong opposition from workers at Unifor Local 444 in Windsor, the Unifor leadership's choice of the October 29 deadline was significant. The Windsor Assembly Plant is down for retooling until November 1, placing the workers in a weaker position as a strike would have no measurable impact for several days. Clearly, the bureaucracy hopes they can ram through their "pattern" just in time for Windsor workers to return to the assembly line and churn out profits for Stellantis.

Local 444 President and Unifor Skilled Trades Chair Dave Cassidy has postured as a critic of the pattern and the Unifor national leadership. But he upheld the right of the union executive to override the rejection by skilled trades at Ford. Cassidy has since backed away from his earlier criticisms, saying that the pattern would be very hard to break. He also rejected workers' demands for in-person meetings and voting. Local 444 notified workers last weekend that they had to register an email address by Monday, October 23, so as to be able to cast a ballot in the online ratification vote.

With the contracts at the Detroit Three in the US and Canada expiring nearly simultaneously last month, workers have been in an objectively powerful position to wage a united North America-wide struggle to extract inflation-busting wage increases and job protections during the EV transition from the automakers, which have been raking in billions of dollars in profits. Instead, Unifor officials have been working throughout the entire bargaining process to tamp down workers' expectations. Their principal goal has been to keep Canadian autoworkers separated from their brothers and sisters at the Detroit Three in the United States, with Payne repeating the mantra that the union would "chart our own course."

This reactionary Canadian nationalism has been the hallmark of Unifor and the Canadian Auto Workers before it for the past four decades. It has served to divide autoworkers across North America, pitting them against each other in a race to the bottom on wages, conditions, and pensions. While the auto giants have operated with global production and restructuring plans, the union bureaucracies on both sides of the border have confined workers in a nationalist straitjacket that has facilitated a massive reduction in real wages, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of auto jobs in the US and Canada, and massive profits for the Detroit Three.

Unifor's "charting our own course" strategy has left workers on the picket lines in the United States to fight

alone, with their Canadian colleagues essentially forced to act as scabs by Payne and her fellow six-figure-salary-earning bureaucrats. The sham limited "stand up" strike called by United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain has allowed the vast majority of the Detroit Three's most profitable truck plants to continue operating over a month after contracts expired for close to 150,000 workers south of the border.

A strike at one or all three companies in Canada would immediately impact operations in the US. Furthermore, a serious fight in Canada would fuel growing demands in the US for an all-out strike and provide encouragement to autoworkers in Mexico determined to fight highly exploitative conditions. This is something which the union bureaucracies in each country desperately hope to avoid as they work to subordinate workers to the financial interests of "their own" ruling elites.

The Fain leadership in the US, which was touted by pseudo-left forces around the union bureaucracy as a "reform" faction that would bring more "militancy" to the contract struggle in 2023, offers no genuine alternative to Unifor. On the contrary, Fain and Co. have worked just as hard as Payne to suppress the power of autoworkers and impose the dictates of the Detroit Three in close collaboration with the Biden administration. On Wednesday evening, Fain unveiled a sellout tentative agreement at Ford. The 16,600 striking Ford workers, out of a total of 57,000, were ordered back to work by Fain without seeing, let alone voting on, the contract. The tentative agreement provides for a meager 25 percent wage increase over four and a half years and maintains the two-tier wage system.

Autoworkers at Stellantis must draw the lessons from these sellouts and organize their opposition through the building of rank-and-file committees in each plant which can coordinate with each other and develop ties with workers in the United States, Mexico and beyond. Workers at Stellantis' Jeep plant in Toledo, Ohio, have formed the Toledo Jeep Rank-and-File Committee to fight for an all-out strike across the industry. It is to these workers and workers across Canada that autoworkers must turn if they want to fight the sellout being prepared by the Unifor bureaucracy.



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