

More Chrysler locals reject UAW contract betrayal

By Jerry White
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Auto workers at six large union locals have voted to reject the tentative agreement reached between the United Auto Workers union and Chrysler LLC. If opposition continues in the same proportion, the contract will be defeated. This would be the first national UAW contract defeated by the rank and file since 1982, when Chrysler workers fought to recoup losses from the 1979-80 Chrysler bailout.

The ‘no’ vote on Sunday at the Jefferson North plant in Detroit was a particular blow to the UAW bureaucracy. Top union officials, such as UAW President Ron Gettelfinger and Vice President General Holiefield, had personally campaigned for a ‘yes’ vote at the plant. According to workers attending the union meeting, Holiefield announced the factory’s second shift would soon be laid off. He threatened workers by saying that it was unlikely they would get their jobs back if they did not approve a contract that improved Chrysler’s competitiveness.

The contract opens the door for Chrysler’s owners—private equity firm Cerberus Capital Management—to accelerate plans to shut down and sell off plants and impose sweeping wage and benefit concessions. In exchange the UAW bureaucracy will get control of one of the largest private investment funds in the US—a multi-billion retiree health care trust fund, known as a Voluntary Employees’ Beneficiary Association or VEBA.

There was widespread opposition to the contract among Jefferson workers, with some carrying hand-made signs saying, “Vote No.” Fifty-seven percent of 1,100 production workers and 79.5 percent of 195 skilled trades workers opposed the deal, according to the union.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party interviewed workers and distributed statements opposing the contract at the Jefferson North plant. (See “Detroit auto workers speak out against UAW-Chrysler contract”)

The Detroit plant, which employs 2,200 workers who make the Jeep Grand Cherokee and Jeep Commander, was the fourth large assembly plant to reject the contract since voting began Thursday.

On Saturday, 79 percent of production workers from UAW Local 110 at the St. Louis (South) assembly plant rejected the contract. Members of UAW Local 136 at the sister plant, St. Louis (North) Assembly, voted down the deal by an 81 percent margin. Fifty-four percent of Local 1183 workers who voted rejected the contract at the company’s Newark, Delaware plant, which is closing in 2009.

The UAW had hoped the contract would pass at Jefferson North and St. Louis North, two of only a handful of plants that Chrysler indicated would have new products following the expiration of the next contract in 2011.

The contract was also defeated at UAW Local 122, which represents workers at a stamping plant in Twinsburg, Ohio, where 53 percent of those who participated voted “no,” according to the local’s Web site. At UAW Local 961, representing an axle plant in Detroit, 54 percent of workers who voted turned down the contract.

So far, at least six locals—representing more than 11,000 workers—have rejected the deal reached between the union and automaker, and at least eight others—representing nearly 6,500 workers—have approved it, according to the *Detroit News*. Smaller locals in Trenton, Michigan; Perrysburg, Ohio; Milwaukee and Kenosha, Wisconsin; and Morrow, Georgia, supported the deal.

A majority of Chrysler’s 45,000 UAW members must vote ‘yes’ for approval. A Chrysler executive told the *Detroit Free Press* the company believes “we’re in trouble” if the contract failed at Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit and two other assembly plants,

which are voting this week, in Belvidere, Illinois and Sterling Heights, Michigan.

In the face of mass opposition several local union leaders have opposed the deal, in contrast to the agreement with General Motors, which was unanimously supported by local presidents. The UAW bureaucracy has moved quickly to suppress the opposition from within its ranks.

On October 17 UAW Vice President Holiefield sent a letter to local officials whose appointments are dependent on the approval of the international union, making it clear that opposition to the deal could mean the loss of their well-paid positions and a return to the assembly line. "The International Union is asking that all appointed union representatives stand in solidarity in support of this Tentative Agreement," the letter read in part, adding that they should "educate [themselves] on the contents contained in the highlights and seek out workers to show your support." It concluded, "Please acknowledge your receipt and endorsement of this Tentative Agreement by your signature and Local Union number below."

The *New York Times* reported that union "leaders have several options before the voting ends. Officials have already begun lobbying local leaders to push for approval of the deal. Since some contract details still need to be worked out, the union and the company could come up with assurances or provisions at particular plants that could help swing the vote in favor." This includes offering a \$3,000 signing bonus to temporary workers at the Belvidere, Illinois, assembly plant, where opposition is widespread because they are not being hired as full-time employees, like temporary workers at GM.

Even more ominously, the *New York Times* reported, "If the contract seems headed to defeat, the union could suspend the voting and go on to Ford in hopes of reaching an agreement there." Such undemocratic methods would not be alien to the UAW, which is controlled by a bureaucracy completely unaccountable to the workers it claims to represent.

There are also signs those union officials currently opposing the deal would be more than willing to back a renegotiated offer if it included certain cosmetic changes. A leading opponent of the contract is Bill Parker, chief of the UAW Chrysler committee that negotiated the accord and president of Local 1700 at the Sterling Heights Assembly plant. Long associated with the New Directions faction of the UAW, Parker has criticized UAW President Ron Gettelfinger for not securing commitments for work at Chrysler plants as far into the future as he did in the

UAW-General Motors agreement.

If fact, those so-called commitments are worthless. Any new products are contingent on "market conditions," and there are countless loopholes for GM to continue shutting plants and laying off thousands of workers. This was underscored by the announcements made after the GM contract was approved that the company was eliminating second shifts at the Detroit/Hamtramck and Pontiac truck assembly plants—two factories where new product commitments were made—laying off more than 1,600 workers indefinitely.

Parker and other dissidents in the UAW do not offer any genuine alternative to the Solidarity House bureaucracy. The issue is not reforming the UAW—which, with the VEBA scheme, will now become a profit-making business—but breaking with this outlived organization.

Rejection of the contract is only the first step. The contract fight must be taken out of the hands of the UAW and rank-and-file committee organized to launch a struggle to defend workers' jobs, living standards and working conditions. A national auto strike should be launched and a campaign begun to bring out GM, Ford, Delphi, Visteon and other workers, together with an appeal to auto workers in Canada, Latin America, Asia and Europe who are facing attacks by the same global auto giants.

The defense of workers' conditions and rights must be developed on an entirely new basis. This means, above all, the building of a new political movement of the working class, independent of the two parties of big business, to fight for a program that starts from the needs of working people, not the profits and stock portfolios of CEOs and Wall Street speculators.

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