

Kansas City GM workers first to vote against UAW sellout deal

By Jerry White
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Workers at the General Motors Fairfax Assembly plant in Kansas City, Kansas have voted decisively against the tentative agreement reached by the United Auto Workers. It was the first vote on the four-year deal that will cover 53,000 GM workers nationwide.

In a rebuke to the UAW, which sought to ram through the deal only two days after releasing the details of the agreement, 63 percent of production workers and 67 percent of skilled trade workers voted “no” on Friday and Saturday. The factory, which produces the Chevrolet Malibu and Buick LaCrosse models, employs 3,230 workers.

Well aware that a snap vote would incite opposition from rank-and-file workers, the UAW nevertheless opted for this strategy because UAW President Dennis Williams, Vice President Cindy Estrada & Co. know that the more time that workers have to study the deal, the more time they will have to build opposition. Votes at the rest of the GM plants are expected to be concluded this week.

The vote by the Kansas City workers has thrown the UAW apparatus into a crisis, and it is now redoubling its efforts to lie and threaten workers to get the deal through. In a message to Fairfax workers, UAW Local 31 President Vicki Hale wrote that union officials from across the US held a conference call after the “no” vote. Top UAW executives told Hale and other local officers that if workers defeated the contract nationwide there would be no alternative but to strike, adding that such a walkout “absolutely does not guarantee further gains.”

At the end of the negotiations, Hale continued, “The GM board of directors made it absolutely clear that there are no more concessions to give at this time... If a strike becomes inevitable the leadership team made it absolutely clear that the funding for more concessions will come out of the \$1.9 billion in product allocation money.”

As in the Fiat Chrysler negotiations, talk of a strike is intended as a threat not against the companies but against the workers. The UAW is opposed to any serious struggle against their corporate “partners” and is telling workers that they will have to endure an isolated walkout, with meager

strike pay, and in the end will gain nothing. On top of this, workers are being threatened with plant closings and the destruction of jobs.

The claims that the UAW has investment commitments that have “created or retained” 3,300 jobs are in fact just as worthless as the decades of so-called “job security” agreements that did nothing to stop the destruction of more than one million jobs at the Detroit Big Three automakers since 1979. The current deal allows the permanent closing of the Janesville, Wisconsin plant. Other facilities, including the Marion, Indiana stamping plant, have no new products. Such factories will be on the chopping block unless the UAW wins “job opportunities” by imposing even deeper concessions.

The contract passed at the Lansing, Michigan Grand River assembly plant over the weekend, although 43 percent of the workers still opposed it. The factory has been hit with thousands of layoffs, and union officials have cut several deals to make the plant “competitive.” Some 500 jobs are being brought back to build the Chevrolet Camaro, which is being moved from GM’s Oshawa plant near Toronto, Canada, in a move that threatens thousands of jobs.

The UAW is using economic blackmail to force GM workers to accept a rotten deal. An examination of the details of the contract shows why. The GM deal, like the Fiat Chrysler contract before it, cannot in any serious way be referred to as a “labor agreement” in the sense that it obligates the company to abide by wage standards, work rules and other terms of employment. Rather, it is a contract between two business entities—General Motors and UAW, Inc.—to increase the profits extracted out of the hides of autoworkers.

The hundreds of pages of the contract set out the obligations of the UAW—defined as the company’s “labor partner”—to impose the dictates of management. In exchange, the UAW apparatus, which controls nine percent of the company’s stock through its UAW Retiree Medical Benefits Trust, participates in a vast network of labor-management schemes to boost profits, prevent any

labor action and restructure the company's operations through plant closings and layoffs.

The centerpiece of the UAW's claims of "significant wage gains" is that second-tier workers will attain what is called "traditional wages" after working eight years. However, this guarantees nothing since the contract is only for four years, and the UAW and the company have a long record of abandoning any previous pledges due to "economic circumstances."

In any case, after eight or more years the new standard wage of \$29 an hour—the wage tier-one workers have been frozen at for a decade—will be far closer to a poverty level wage than it is now.

Far from abolishing the hated two-tier wage and benefit system, the GM deal will add a third, fourth and even more tiers (by some estimates eight or more). This includes first- and second- tier workers, various levels of temporary workers, parts workers and contract workers at subsidiaries like GM Subsystems Manufacturing. The latter, who make poverty-level wages, are not included in the national agreement but are forced to pay dues to the UAW.

"This is a sellout," a veteran worker at GM's Toledo Transmission plant said. "They are flooding the ranks with open-ended numbers of temps to cut out all the overtime for traditional employees, pit tier against tier, so people at the top are a target to get rid of. And once they eliminate the first tier, then the second tier will be the target. The contract creates competition between workers, to bring all workers down."

Senior workers—who have suffered a decade-long wage freeze that has resulted in nearly a one-third cut in real wages—are given an insulting six percent pay raise and two four-percent lump sums payments. Cost of living adjustments first won in 1950 have been replaced by "performance bonuses" that will lead to a return to the hated piecework system.

In other words, rather than second-tier workers being "in-progression" towards a future of good paying and secure jobs and full employer-paid health care and pensions, the contract puts all autoworkers "in-regression" to a permanently lower pay and benefit scale once older, higher paid workers are pushed out.

Perhaps the most important issue, which gives the contract its "transformative" character for the auto bosses and the UAW, is not specifically in the agreement. In line with the Obama administration's policy of shifting the costs of health care from the employers to workers, both the corporations and the union are determined to eliminate the "cradle-to-grave" medical care coverage won by autoworkers.

The UAW's proposal for a UAW-run health care "co-op"

was removed from the current proposal because, in the words of the industry web site *Automotive News*, "hourly workers at [Fiat Chrysler] viewed it suspiciously as a Trojan horse to raise their nominal out-of-pocket cost of health care." While industry analysts called Williams' inclusion of the proposal in the current negotiations a "tactical mistake," former GM negotiator Art Schwartz told *Automotive News* that that "idea...could be revived later."

Second-tier workers already receive such substandard medical benefits that they do not meet the threshold for Obama's so-called Cadillac Tax on "high cost" benefits. However, the UAW has pledged to work with the company to reduce the benefits of tier-one workers or impose first-time deductibles on those workers who refuse to give up their current plans.

"They want us to go to their cheap doctors, instead of our specialists," said a worker with 15 years at the Arlington, Texas GM plant, where 4,125 workers are voting today. "We were duped in the last contract. The UAW said we had to help the company out of bankruptcy by taking a pay freeze and losing our COLA. Now they have made \$8 billion in the first nine months this year, and all the UAW is going to negotiate for us a \$1.75 raise over four years. A lot of workers are against it.

"The \$8,000 signing bonus is a bribe to keep you quiet. But our plant is making Cadillac Escalades and other big SUVs that are the company's moneymakers. We have huge leverage, but the UAW won't use it. They keep saying we can work out something with the company, and then we get nothing.

"I've seen people drop dead and they will move them over to keep the line running. The bottom line is they are just thinking about the dollar, not the worker. I was injured because they sped up the line, and because I've been on workers' comp for 90 days I don't even qualify for the signing bonus. It's a slap in the face. The UAW isn't fighting for us, they are fighting for themselves."

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