

Reject Ford Canada-Unifor sellout agreement

For a counteroffensive of North American autoworkers against wage and job cuts

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Ford workers must reject the rotten, four-year concessions contract presented by Unifor following the conclusion of negotiations this week. This must be the first step in launching a counter-offensive against the company-union conspiracy to attack the jobs, wages and living standards of autoworkers. To mount such an offensive workers must break out of the straightjacket imposed by Unifor and appeal for support from autoworkers in the United States, Mexico and internationally.

The claims of Unifor President Jerry Dias and his fellow union bureaucrats that this is a “no concessions” deal are a fraud. Like the concessions-laden contracts rammed through at GM and Fiat-Chrysler, the Ford deal would further entrench the hated two-tier wage system. New hires will be forced to labour 11 years before reaching parity with the rest of the workforce. After a decade-long pay freeze, older workers will be compelled to accept a miserable 4 percent pay increase over four years. When inflation is factored in this will amount to a further wage cut in real terms.

To make matters worse, Unifor’s endorsement of such givebacks comes after a drastic decline in the value of the Canadian dollar over the past four years, which has seen costs skyrocket for workers and slashed labour costs for the companies. This has helped the Detroit Three rake in massive profits since 2012.

Unifor also capitulated to management on pensions, agreeing that all new hires will be placed on a defined-contributions scheme. This means that the basic right to a retirement income, achieved by generations of workers through decades of bitter struggle, has been abandoned. Instead workers’ retirement is to be made dependent upon the vagaries of the stock market. In the

process, Unifor has created a three-tier workforce, with current high-seniority workers retaining a defined-benefits plan, new hires forced into a wholly defined-contributions scheme while others will be left on a hybrid model.

In contrast to his dishonest rhetoric over the past week about no concessions, Dias bluntly admitted in an April 2015 *Globe and Mail* interview on the issue of pensions, “This is a huge fundamental issue for us as an organization.” If the union was to cede to the Detroit Three on the defined-benefit pension issue, he explained, “all employers that have them” would push for their elimination. In what amounts to a damning indictment of Unifor’s subsequent capitulation to corporate management, Dias went on, “If you take a look at the profitability of the [auto] industry today, there is no reason for them to ... request eliminating defined-benefit pensions.”

Dias’ promise that accepting these rotten terms will secure jobs is no less dishonest. Unifor, and its Canadian Auto Workers predecessor, have made such claims ever since they connived with the leadership of the United Auto Workers to divide North American autoworkers along national lines in the mid-1980s. The split has facilitated the auto companies’ effort to pit autoworkers in Canada against their class brothers and sisters in the US in a race to the bottom. Meanwhile, auto jobs and entire communities have been decimated.

The investments allegedly guaranteed in the current deal are in reality entirely dependent on yet-to-be finalized cash handouts to Ford and the other auto companies from the federal and Ontario Liberal governments and “market conditions”—including the continued low value of the Canadian dollar.

The Liberals are a big business party which has

launched attacks on working people and cut public spending whenever they have held power. If they agree to provide “aid” to the auto industry, it will be on the basis of a pledge by Unifor to continue enforcing concessions from workers so that Canadian big business can continue to make huge profits from what Dias boasts is “Canada’s Number One export industry.”

Unifor has made no secret of its desire to deepen its already intimate collaboration with the Liberals. Dias appealed at the press conference unveiling the Ford deal for the Trudeau government to assist Unifor in attracting auto investment. He also claimed that the decline in the dollar’s value had been a good thing for Unifor’s talks with the Detroit Three, a statement which amounts to an acceptance of wage cuts for all workers via increased food and other costs.

Dias praises the Liberals because they are more open to consulting with the union bureaucracy on how best to attack the jobs and living standards of working people, so that Unifor can outbid its competitors in the UAW by offering up its members as cheap labour commodities for exploitation by the auto giants. Trudeau appeared at Unifor’s national convention and was given a hero’s welcome precisely because the entire bureaucracy sees its own privileges as being bound up with good working relations with Trudeau’s Liberals. That is with a government that is committed to policies of deepening austerity against the working class, including wholesale privatization of public infrastructure, and increased military aggression abroad.

At the press conference announcing the tentative agreement with Ford early Tuesday morning, Dias refused to provide many details because he feared that Ford workers, angered by decades of givebacks, would rebel and resist the union’s efforts to ram through the deal as quickly as possible.

At the ratification meetings this weekend, Dias and the Unifor officialdom will seek to bully workers by presenting self-serving contract “highlights,” while claiming that a “no” vote will put investment and jobs in jeopardy. This is a bare-faced lie. Every concessions contract imposed over the past three decades has only whetted the appetites of the corporate elite for more and prepared the way for plant shutdowns and layoffs.

In truth, the only way for workers to guarantee secure employment is by voting down this rotten deal, rejecting Unifor’s nationalist and corporatist perspective, and mobilizing autoworkers for a general strike to bring the industry to a halt throughout North America.

There is no way to conduct such a struggle within the framework of Unifor. Prior to the conclusion of the Ford deal, Oakville Local 707 President Dave Thomas and his bargaining colleagues made much of their hostility to the pattern deal enforced at GM and Fiat Chrysler, declaring that they would not recommend it to their members. Local 707 vowed to fight to reduce the pay grid for new hires to eight years and resist the implementation of defined-contributions pensions.

This pose of opposition was quickly abandoned. Local 707 bargaining committee member Bob Scott appeared at the press conference alongside Dias to enthuse that the contract was “incredible.” After referring to things “we don’t like” without specifying what they were, Scott continued, “We believe at Local 707 that we have bargained the best agreement that we have seen in a very long time.”

This demonstrates that the only way forward for workers at Ford is to break politically and organizationally with Unifor and build new organizations of genuine working-class industrial and political struggle. As the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* has insisted throughout the contract struggle at the Canadian operations of the Detroit Three, workers must make a “no” vote the starting point for the establishment of rank-and-file action committees to prosecute a counter-offensive against the concessions demanded by corporate management and their union errand boys.

These action committees must make an urgent appeal for solidarity action by autoworkers in the United States, Mexico and internationally, as well as working people across Canada confronting similar threats to their jobs and living standards. The nationalist and pro-capitalist program of the unions must be repudiated in favour of a socialist and internationalist perspective, which offers the only way for workers to secure social rights like a good-paying, secure job and a safe retirement.

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