

GM Cami workers authorize strike in Canada

By Carl Bronski
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Autoworkers at the General Motors CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario voted Sunday to authorize the Unifor union to call a strike if a settlement for a new labour agreement is not reached by the September 17 deadline. Workers voted by 99.8 percent to strike, with 1,200 of the approximately 3,000 workers at the plant voting.

The factory, 156 km (97 miles) southwest of Toronto, opened in 1989 as a joint venture between GM and Japan-based Suzuki Motor Corporation, and was originally operated under the name Canadian Automotive Manufacturing, Inc. (CAMI). GM took full control of the plant in 2009 when Suzuki withdrew, and expanded the plant in 2016 after it received a half a billion dollars in government tax breaks and other incentives.

Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union, have long negotiated a separate contract at the CAMI plant, which has been used as a laboratory by GM and the unions for various corporatist schemes and to set a new, lower benchmark to drive down labor costs at other factories. Workers at the plant currently produce the Chevrolet Equinox.

Production of the mid-sized sports utility Terrain vehicle has been phased out over the past several months. Last February GM announced it was shifting production of that vehicle to Mexico with the loss of about 600 jobs in Canada. In the wake of the announcement, about two hundred workers took retirement whilst another 400 face layoff at the end of August.

The plant, which has been running three shifts, six days a week for the past eight years, has been a cash cow for General Motors, producing some \$2 billion per year in profits. Despite this, Unifor has pushed through concession contracts that have intensified the pace of work in the plant, entrenched the notorious two-tier wages system and increased the use of temporary

part-time workers. The union also sanctioned a reduction in benefits, a freeze in wages and the elimination of any semblance of a defined benefits pension program for new hires.

In the wake of the strike mandate vote, Unifor Local 88 President Dan Borthwick stated that the union will be demanding a boost in wages, improved benefits and future investment for the plant. Workers, however, have little confidence the union will reverse its decades-long pattern of concessions. Last February, immediately after GM's layoff announcement, Unifor plant chairman Mike Van Boekel commented on the upcoming contract negotiations in the union's newsletter, saying, "Let me be clear, we are not going to put ourselves on a pedestal and price ourselves out of jobs and people need to look at the big picture."

Readers of the World Socialist Web Site's *Autoworker Newsletter* at the plant reported that only about 60 workers attended the local's meeting earlier this month to finalize the union's bargaining strategy in the upcoming negotiations. At that meeting, Van Boekel's warning to not expect too much was verified when Unifor officials put forth the pattern agreements rammed through at Ford, Fiat Chrysler and GM last year as the model to emulate.

Those deals met with significant resistance from Canadian autoworkers. At all three companies, the so-called "framework agreements"--recommended by the union--received historic lows in ratification votes. At the giant Ford complex in Oakville, workers voted down the deal outright, while at GM St. Catharines the contract barely squeaked through.

Last year's Detroit Three pattern settlement provided a derisory four percent wage rise over three years, in actuality a cut in real wages when the rate of inflation is factored in. The deal also institutionalized the end of defined benefits pensions for new hires that had first been modelled at CAMI, reinforced the hated two tier

system and continued the drive of the auto bosses to develop a third tier of temporary part-time workers. The loophole ridden “frameworks” for future investments have yet to materialize.

In all their contract negotiations and their day-to-day ignoring of workers grievances on the shop floor, Unifor acts as the junior partner of the auto bosses. The recent revelations of the massive bribery scandal involving top United Auto Workers (UAW) executives and Fiat Chrysler management in the United States only underlines the corporatist relationship between the unions and the auto executives. Over the past month, indictments have been handed down alleging that some \$4.5 million in bribes were dispersed by Fiat Chrysler Vice-President Al Iacobelli and his underlings to UAW officials to “take company friendly positions” in a series of contract negotiations.

Iacobelli, after leaving Fiat Chrysler, became one of the central negotiators for GM Canada in the 2016 bargaining round with Unifor that saw the continuation of concessions agreements. GM had been selected by Unifor President Jerry Dias to set the pattern for contracts with the Detroit Three in Canada. Asked by the *Detroit Free Press* about the scandal, Dias said he had always viewed Iacobelli, the architect of several concessions deals, as a professional labour executive. “I’ve probably known Al for 15 years...This is right out of left field. I never would have expected it. I’m in shock to say the least.” Dias’ “shock” emulates the statements of UAW head Dennis Williams despite emerging evidence that former UAW President Bob King, Williams’ predecessor and confidante, was aware of the bribery program as early as 2011.

In recent weeks, Dias has elevated the nationalist positions of the entire trade union bureaucracy by uniting with corporate Canada behind trade war policies. In the just begun renegotiation of the NAFTA agreements with the Trump administration, Dias is urging tariffs be imposed on steel and iron imports from the US and cars produced in Mexico. In the case of auto, Dias is claiming that tariffs will force auto producers to open new plants in Canada and the US. Last week Dias traveled to Washington to meet with Trump’s billionaire commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, who, according to the Unifor president, agreed with him that Mexico is “the problem” when it comes to auto investment.

For decades, the US-based United Auto Workers (UAW), the CAW and now Unifor have pitted autoworkers in Canada and the US against each other, imposing round after round of “whipsawed” wage and benefit cuts in the name of defending “American” or “Canadian” jobs. Now they are joining forces, adopting Trump’s anti-Mexican chauvinism and calling for the rules of NAFTA to be changed at the expense of Mexican workers.

The aim is not to defend Canadian or US workers but to assist the US-based automakers in dividing the working class and boosting their “competitiveness” and profits against rivals in Europe and Asia. As workers have so bitterly learned over the past thirty years, dividing workers one country from the other has only emboldened the corporations to whipsaw wages and conditions in a never-ending race to the bottom.

After decades of union-backed concessions, CAMI workers are looking for a way to fight back. If a fight is to be conducted to recoup the wages, benefits and job protections handed over by Unifor, then workers must take the initiative themselves. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* urges CAMI workers to elect rank-and-file committees in the plant to draw up their own demands. These should include: opposition to all layoffs, the abolition of multi-tiered wages and benefits, and the restoration of company-paid pensions. Workers should also demand the transformation of all temporary and part-time workers into permanent employees, with full wages, benefits, and a double-digit wage increase that would offset the years of wage cuts.

The rank-and-file committees, which must be independent of Unifor, the UAW and the big business political parties, should establish lines of communication between CAMI workers and autoworkers throughout North America and create conditions for a common struggle to defend the right to a secure and good-paying job for all workers.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>