

As industry analyst calls UAW-automaker negotiations “Kabuki theatre”

Autoworkers demand substantial improvement in wages and conditions on eve of contract talks

By Jerry White
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With a week left before the beginning of negotiations for new labor agreements, autoworkers in the US want substantial pay increases, the abolition of the two-tier wage and benefit system and other improvements.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) and General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler will formally begin “talks”—in reality, a joint conspiracy against workers—on July 15, with the old four-year agreement covering 155,000 autoworkers expiring in mid-September.

“We don’t want to be sold out by the UAW again,” Sheri, who has worked at Fiat Chrysler’s Jefferson Assembly Plant in Detroit for eight years, told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*. “We want the tiers done away with and temporary part-time (TPT) workers converted to full-time. We want the profit-sharing formula fixed because we are always being short-changed. We want the TPTs to get profit-sharing too because they produce the profits just like the full-time workers.”

Sheri said workers were putting out 500-600 Jeep Cherokees on each shift every day, with some models starting at \$45,000 a piece. “They keep saying, ‘Buy what you build,’ but we can’t afford to with our wages. We need to restore COLA [Cost-of-Living Adjustments] and real pensions for second-tier workers instead of 401(k)s.”

Rick, a second-tier worker at FCA’s Toledo Jeep Assembly Plant, echoed these sentiments. “Workers want to dissolve the tier system, bring back pensions and lower co-pays. The companies don’t even pay enough for subsistence. If you could afford to buy what you build and live comfortably, that would be a good thing, but that means bringing the wages way up.

“As much as Henry Ford was a maniac,” Rick said, “at least he increased pay in 1914 to five dollars a day. They

don’t care about the people any more. The closest vehicles workers can afford to buy, and have a house too, is a Chevy Cruze passenger car, and GM just shut the Lordstown plant that produces it. It’s crazy, but we’re looking back at Henry Ford like he was a humanitarian.”

Autoworkers are heading into a direct conflict with the UAW, which has spent the last four decades imposing one concession after another on workers in order to boost corporate profits and improve the competitive position of the Detroit-based automakers against their international rivals.

Last month, the industry publication *Automotive News* revealed that GM and the UAW plan to use the upcoming negotiations to reach a deal to supposedly “save” one or two of the plants targeted by GM for closure, which would include a sharp increase in the number of low-paid contract workers and higher co-pays for health care benefits. Two years ago, GM’s Corporate Financial Officer Chuck Stevens told Wall Street analysts the company wanted to have 50 percent of its work done by temporary labor.

The upcoming talks are not negotiations in any serious sense but strategy sessions during which the UAW and the auto executives will plot how to ram pro-company deals past the opposition of rank-and-file workers.

“What will occur this month is akin to Kabuki theater,” wrote Bill Koenig, senior editor of advancedmanufacturing.com, on July 5. The “ritual” will begin with union leaders shaking the hands with their company counterparts and posing for the cameras, while “saying as little as possible.” Behind the scenes, Koenig wrote, union and management committees will try to work out a deal that would allow the companies to “make as much money as possible from trucks for now,” while waiting to see when if at all they would get returns from investments in

electric and self-driving technologies.

However, Koenig warns, rank-and-file autoworkers could upset this theatrical performance. “UAW members have seen the automakers pile up profits since the last negotiations in 2015. Those members are going to want their share,” he writes. “The negotiations may begin with Kabuki theater elements. But there still is uncertainty ahead—for the union and the automakers.”

The automakers have made record profits for nearly a decade since the sweeping concessions imposed by the Obama administration, with the full backing of the UAW, during the 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler. This historic rollback for autoworkers, which included halving the wages of new hires, the elimination of overtime payments after eight hours and other concessions, set the precedent for an assault on every section of the working class.

The proliferation of part-time and temporary work associated with the “gig economy” and the sharp decline in real wages, which has continued under the Trump administration, has led to a boom in corporate profits and stock market share values. GM alone has spent over \$25 billion on stock buybacks over the last five years.

Just like they did in 2015, the automakers began the contract year by announcing plant closings and major layoffs to beat back the demands of autoworkers and blackmail them into further concessions. Last November *Automotive News* wrote that the announced closure of the Detroit-Hamtramck, Lordstown, Ohio and Oshawa, Ontario assembly plants was aimed at “managing UAW members’ expectations” and “changing the narrative from members wanting more to potentially just wanting to save jobs and plants.”

Asked about this, Sheri said, “That won’t scare us. You see they are selling these cars and trucks and making so much, so we feel we can demand more. For the eight years I’ve been at Chrysler, I’ve been hearing that car sales are going to fall. It’s a tactic to scare us. We have lost so much. We should not take what they offer us.

“The UAW will play the game, maybe with a one-day strike to make us feel like we achieved something. But it’s going to be a crappy contract dressed up in a bow.

“We don’t trust the UAW. They are still crooks. It wasn’t only [UAW vice presidents] General Holifield and Norwood Jewell who took bribes. People are upset. The UAW shoved the contract down our throats in 2015, with Jewell and other negotiators saying this was the best they could get. We’re not going to go for that this time. The bigger the signing bonus, the more BS the contract is,” she concluded.

“We are going to have to strike,” Rick, the Toledo Jeep worker said. “We will have to shut down production of the

big money-makers like the Chevy Corvette and GM’s Silverado and Sierra pickups. If you shut down Jeep production, even just in Toledo, you take Chrysler down.

“We have to strike the union. Workers should outline our own list of demands, demand open negotiations and elect a rank-and-file committee to fight for our demands in the contract talks. We not only have to improve our wages, we have to improve every aspect of our working lives down to vacations and shop safety. The union shop chairman recently said a situation was safe, just two days before someone got hurt.”

Mary, a young second-tier worker at Ford’s Dearborn Assembly Plant, said, “I work with people who are TPTs whose lights are being turned off and can hardly keep their cars running. People in the plants shouldn’t have to worry about that. The union does not stand up for us. The writing is on the wall. Enough is enough. Let’s get together to work for better wages and benefits. I’m not afraid anymore.”

The growing militancy of US autoworkers is part of a global resurgence of the class struggle, including strikes by teachers in the US and around the world, the wildcat strikes by Mexican maquiladora workers in Matamoros, walkouts by autoworkers in Hungary and other Eastern European countries, the Yellow Vest protests in France and the upheavals in Algeria and Sudan.

The organization of opposition to the conspiracy of the UAW and the automakers urgently requires the formation of independent organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees, outside of the control of the UAW. This must be connected to a fight to build a movement of the entire working class, in the US and internationally, in a political offensive against the capitalist profit system.

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers to join this Thursday’s online meeting to discuss the building of rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the contract fight out of the hands of the UAW, prepare a national strike and unite American autoworkers with workers in Canada, Mexico and around the world in a common fight.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>