

As auto talks begin, UAW and companies conspire to enforce new wave of concessions on workers

By Jerry White
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Facing widespread opposition from rank-and-file workers over the years of givebacks by the United Auto Workers, UAW President Gary Jones opened contract talks with the auto companies Monday with rhetoric about stopping the “race to the bottom” for workers that the UAW has long endorsed.

“I have heard loud and clear—at every Ford plant and local I visit—that they expect to share in the profits that their hard work and dedication has made possible. We’re seeing record profits for our American companies, but, sad to say, those gains aren’t translating to our workers’ gains.”

Jones continued, “But despite record corporate profits, we’ve been watching a race to the bottom over the past several years for working men and women in this country.” He added, “We will need to address the issues of temporary employees and outsourcing” and “take up the issue of progression and shorten that eight-year window that my brothers and sisters say—LOUDLY... is way too long to get to the top of the pay scale.”

Jones takes workers to be fools, as if they don’t know that all the conditions he refers to were implemented with the full agreement and backing of the UAW. Contracts imposed by the UAW in 2015 and before established two-tier wages, eliminated the eight-hour day and vastly expanded the number of low-paid “temporary part-time workers” who pay UAW dues but have no rights.

In 2015, Fiat Chrysler workers rejected a UAW proposed contract by a 2-to-1 margin, the first rejection of a UAW-backed national contract in three decades. A second deal was only passed at Chrysler and then GM and Ford through a campaign of intimidation, lies and

fraud. This included the alleged passage of the Ford contract by a 51–49 percent margin amid widespread charges from workers of ballot stuffing by the UAW.

Since 2015, half of the top eight UAW officials who negotiated the Fiat Chrysler deal, including former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, have been convicted of taking bribes for signing that sweetheart deal. The rest of the union apparatus, including Jones, is shrouded in suspicion in the corruption investigation by federal prosecutors who have charged the entire UAW as a “co-conspirator” in the illegal bribery scheme.

In the ritual handshake across the table between Jones and Ford Executive Chairman William Clay Ford Jr., the union president’s handlers were careful to avoid a repeat of the warm embrace between his predecessor and Fiat Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne in 2015. The embrace, which was lampooned by workers as “The Hug,” was a symbol of the incestuous relationship between the UAW and the auto bosses. The decision was also made to hold the talks at the headquarters of Ford, General Motors and Fiat Chrysler instead of the joint union-management training centers, which were the conduits of the company payoffs to the UAW.

UAW spokesman Brian Rothenberg, who rejected the request by the *World Socialist Web Site* for press credentials to cover the opening of the talks, told reporters that the 2015 contracts were “good for workers and good for companies.”

Various industry analysts and news commentators have called this the most contentious negotiations since the bankruptcy restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler in 2009. The *Detroit News* headlined its

article, “Strike or no strike, UAW-Detroit Three contract talks could be brutal affair.”

However, the conflict is not between the auto companies and their servants in the UAW, but between rank-and-file workers, on the one side, and the corporate-UAW alliance, on the other.

In so far as the UAW has suggested that it might call a strike, this is another ploy. In 2007, the UAW called one-day and less than one-day “Hollywood strikes” at GM and Chrysler before signing contracts that introduced the hated two-tier wage and benefit system. In 2015 and earlier this year, the UAW called one-day strikes at auto parts producers Lear and Faurecia before signing concessionary contracts.

In comments after the official opening of the talks, Joe Hinrichs, president of Ford’s global automotive operations, gave a more direct explanation of the relationship between the companies and the UAW than Jones’ empty rhetoric.

“If you start this with the premise that we are in this together, we want to compete and win, that’s a good starting point,” Hinrichs said. “The talks are an event, every four years, but our relationship is ongoing... We know that the UAW will work together to compete, we also know they want us to be competitive.”

Hinrichs added that the further expansion of temporary workers was an “interesting topic” because the automakers “need flexibility for absenteeism, or during the summer, or during a product launch when there is a lot of overtime, and I think the UAW understands that.”

In fact, the use of temps and other low-paid workers is key to the automakers’ strategy of driving out “legacy workers” earning higher wages and benefits and creating an entirely low-wage casual workforce.

“Healthcare also comes up” in discussions with the UAW, Hinrichs said, “it is part of the competitive conversation vis-à-vis our salaried employees and versus our competition. We’ll have that conversation in private,” Hinrichs concluded.

“In private”—this is the key phrase. The UAW and the companies are conspiring behind the scenes as they work out a strategy to enforce a new wave of concessions on autoworkers.

The corporations and the UAW attempted to push through a UAW-controlled healthcare “co-op” in 2015, which would relieve the companies of their obligations

and make the UAW responsible for cutting benefits. While workers rebelled against that, the UAW and the corporations are trying to reprise the proposal, cynically saying it would address the impact of the opioid crisis on autoworkers and their families.

In order to beat back the expectations of autoworkers, the companies and the UAW are once again using the threat of more plant closings and mass layoffs, pointing to signs of another global downturn and predictions that streamlined manufacturing processes for the production of electric vehicles could lead to the elimination of 35,000 jobs. GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, like VW and other global automakers, are carrying out a worldwide assault on jobs.

With the corporations making a decade of record profits and margins the highest in North America, autoworkers are determined to recoup their losses and win substantial improvements in wages and conditions. This is what accounts for the bitterness of the upcoming fight.

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, which was barred from questioning union and company officials, is once again providing autoworkers with a voice and fighting program. This includes the call for the formation of a network of rank-and-file factory committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UAW, the formulation of workers’ own demands and the preparation of a national strike. This must be combined with the adoption of a new strategy based on the international unity of autoworkers and a challenge to the capitalist profit system.

We urge autoworkers to attend this week’s call-in to discuss the organization of this fight. To register go to: www.wsws.org/autocall

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>