

Countdown to contract fight: In final week before contract expires, autoworkers gear up for struggle against companies and UAW

By Tom Hall
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On September 12 at 7:00 pm EDT, the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter is hosting an online meeting to discuss the strategy and perspective needed to organize this struggle. To participate, visit wsws.org/autocall.

Less than one week remains before the contract expiration at GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler at 11:59 p.m. on Saturday, September 14.

A near-unanimous nationwide strike authorization vote demonstrates that autoworkers are determined to win back everything they have lost through decades of concessions and plant closures.

But they also know that the UAW, which is exposed by an expanding bribery scandal as the bought agents of the auto companies, are conspiring with lead bargainer GM to force through even more concessions. Among many workers, the wall of silence surrounding the official talks are the surest sign that the UAW is preparing yet another sellout.

“How can we trust anything the UAW is doing? They’re so corrupt,” a Chicago Ford Assembly worker told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “The investigation into UAW International should have everyone questioning everything. Why haven’t they told us anything about the contract? Because they’re hiding things!

“You’d think after all these indictments the UAW would try to shape up. But no, that’s not going to happen.”

“There was a 98.5 per cent strike vote here,” a worker at nearby Chicago Ford Stamping said. “[As far as conditions go], I heard that compared to the other plant [Ford Chicago Assembly], it’s like a Holiday Inn here. It’s dirty and nasty and dusty, and it’s too hot in here. They put new cameras here in the entrance [to spy on workers]. I don’t like cameras much to begin with. Right

now, they’re all outside that I know of, but if they were to put the cameras inside, I would have a huge problem with that.

“I don’t like the politics here. As much as the union tries to pretend like they’re my friend, I don’t feel like that they are. I don’t trust anyone in this place from the union or the company management. I just had an issue with a manager who forgot to put a personal day in and after a month I finally got it resolved. Labor relations made the error. They’re the worst part of this place. It’s a miserable experience every time I go in there.”

Last weekend, well-known Amazon whistleblower Shannon Allen led an *Autoworker Newsletter* campaign team at GM’s Arlington Assembly plant near Dallas, Texas. Since traveling to Detroit last December to address a conference convened by the WSWS against GM’s plant closures, Allen has been heavily involved in forging links between Amazon workers and autoworkers. She sits on the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees, which was founded at the December conference.

Allen’s campaign team was warmly received by GM workers, who were particularly excited to see the support they have from Amazon workers. The Arlington plant contains a large number of workers who transferred from plants closed by GM in other states. These “GM gypsies” have been forced to uproot their families because of the UAW’s collusion in plant closings and mass layoffs.

A ferment is beginning to take hold among autoworkers. Last week at Fiat Chrysler’s Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP), an anonymous letter was circulated raising concerns that Fiat Chrysler’s planned expansion of operations in Detroit would be used to undermine seniority rights and replace older workers with lower-paid temps and second-tier workers. The letter

points out in particular the fact that the planned Mack Avenue plant will fall under the jurisdiction of a different UAW local, potentially affecting the transfer rights of senior laid-off workers at Jefferson.

The author states: “They have told us that [the new Mack Avenue plant] will not be completely taking over our product. Sorry I don’t believe them!”

“So why is this being allowed? Why is nobody talking about it?” the letter continues. “I have personally been sold out and lied to by both Chrysler and IUAW over my last 20 years ... I personally feel that our good paying jobs and job security are being given away just like at Marysville Axle Plant, Warren Truck, Indian Transmission Plants, countless other plants that closed and now someone else is building the product! This deal is part of the corruption or at least a direct by-product of it!”

Feeling pressure from autoworkers, local officials at JNAP held a meeting, which was poorly advertised, according to an *Autoworker Newsletter* reader at the plant. Local officials did not provide any updates on the contract negotiations but instead passed out an informational booklet on the UAW Strike Assistance Program. The booklet was largely aimed at discouraging workers from striking because they would receive little to no money in the event of a walkout, even though the UAW has diverted hundreds of millions of dollars for its own purposes from what is now a \$780 million fund.

Workers should be on guard against the possibility that the UAW may call a “Hollywood strike” at one or two facilities, as it did in 2007, in order to allow workers to blow off steam. The 2007 strike was followed by a “transformational agreement” that introduced two-tier wages for the first time.

Another possible outcome is that the UAW and GM agree to keep one or two plants open currently slated for closure as a fig leaf in return for major concessions. A recent article in *Automotive News* suggested that the most likely target for such a maneuver would be the Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant, which is currently slated to close next January.

“D-Ham is the one that makes the most sense,” industry analyst Jeff Schuster told the publication. “Where it’s located from a political standpoint is significant, and one vehicle you could see get saved is the Cadillac CT6. It’s really been fluid in terms of what they’re going to do with that.” Alternatively, GM could reallocate product from Mexico, pitting Mexican and American autoworkers against each other.

Such a move would be tied to measures aimed at reducing GM’s hourly labor costs. In particular, the company has repeatedly cited its relatively low usage of part-time employees, and one former executive told Wall Street that he wanted 50 percent of the company’s work performed by temps. In addition, the auto companies want to gut health care and sharply increase co-pays and other out-of-pocket expenses.

The entire “negotiating” process is illegitimate. The officials on the UAW bargaining teams for the last several contracts have either been indicated or implicated in the massive bribery scandal. The only thing the UAW officials are negotiating right now is the length of their jail terms.

That is why autoworkers must take the conduct of this battle into their own hands. In every workplace, autoworkers should elect factory committees, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers and answerable only to them, not the corrupt UAW. If all workers are united—GM, Ford and FCA, first and second-tier, temporary and contract employees—then they will be more powerful than the corporations and the UAW.

Workers should meet now to formulate their own demands, including the abolition of the two-tier system, equal pay for equal work, a 40 percent raise, roll over all temps and contract workers to full-time positions, halt plant closings and rehire all-laid off and victimized workers.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* is fighting to break through the union-enforced information blockade, help autoworkers take the initiative and establish lines of communication with workers throughout the country and internationally.

“I’ve actually thought of something like that,” a Chicago Stamping autoworker said referring to the call for rank-and-file factory committees. “It sounds like something that would cause a lot of drama [for the company].”

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