

As union prepares sell-out of their struggle

Unifor President Jerry Dias addresses NemaK workers in Windsor

By Carl Bronski
13 September 2019

Unifor president Jerry Dias and other Ontario union officials addressed a rally of striking auto parts workers at NemaK's Windsor, Ontario, plant Thursday morning. The rally came on the eve of a Superior Court hearing scheduled for Friday afternoon where a judge will rule on a contempt of court finding reached last Tuesday, after workers refused to abide by an earlier unfavourable ruling from a provincial labour board.

NemaK workers produce engine blocks for General Motors' Silverado and Corvette vehicles assembled in the United States and Cadillacs made in Shanghai, China. In July, NemaK, a subsidiary of Alfa, a Mexican owned transnational conglomerate, announced that it will shutter its Windsor operation in 2020 due to the loss of its supply contract with GM China which would reduce production capacity in the plant to below 10 percent. Unifor had previously received assurances from NemaK that if their membership in the plant took a wage freeze beginning in 2019, the expiration of the contract in 2020 could be extended to January 2022.

On Labour Day Monday, Unifor officials announced a blockade of the plant until corporate management honoured an earlier undertaking by the company to keep the plant open until 2022. Pickets were then set up to prevent management from removing equipment from the plant. One hundred and eighty parts workers at the facility subsequently went on strike. In response, company management sought and obtained an Ontario Labour Board decision that ruled the protest an "unlawful strike" and ordered the union to immediately end the job action or face penalties.

Dias used militant sounding bluster in a desperate attempt to hide Unifor's abject prostration before the courts and management. "We're here because we're

not going to take this crap anymore," he shouted. He called on ministers in the big business Liberal Party to intervene on the union's behalf and stated that any settlement with NemaK must be done at the bargaining table.

The remarks of Dias and other union officials sought to counterpose the jobs of Canadian NemaK workers to those of NemaK workers in Mexico. The nationalist orientation of Unifor was underscored by a banner on the speakers platform calling for "A new agenda for trade agreements," that is trade war with the rivals of Canadian big business.

Significantly, Dias did not mention a word about the imminent expiration of auto contracts for 155,000 American workers next week or call for a unified mobilization of autoworkers in Canada and the US in a joint industrial fight against their common employers. Instead, Dias told the press that GM management, which takes the NemaK product, would pressure NemaK to accept the union's position in order to maintain their own production schedules. For its part GM issued a terse statement of its own on Thursday saying the Windsor blockade has had no impact on Silverado and Corvette production.

When asked by the press whether he would continue the strike in the face of a threatened \$25,000 per day fine levelled against the union and \$2,000 per day fines against himself and leading members of the Unifor local, Dias evaded the question. Walking back his earlier boast that he would be thrown into jail rather than accept the company's diktat, he meekly declared, "I am not going to prejudge what the court is going to say Friday," going on to insist that this will be resolved "at the bargaining table."

However, the record of Unifor as a junior partner of the corporations speaks for itself.

Unifor has not only accepted layoffs, plant closures and concessions over the years, they have been front and center alongside the auto bosses in ensuring that the drive by corporate management to maximize their profits is enforced over the opposition of rank-and-file workers. After the announcement of the GM Oshawa plant closure last November, Dias issued cries of “No Surrender” to the prospect of 2,600 assembly job losses and another 2,500 parts plant layoffs. He combined this bluster with reactionary calls for a boycott of Mexican-built GM vehicles. In the end Unifor accepted the jobs massacre in exchange for vague promises of several hundred parts stamping jobs.

Meanwhile, Dias and the local Unifor leadership mounted no opposition when Fiat-Chrysler recently announced its “business decision” to end the third shift and lay off 1,500 workers at its Windsor Assembly Plant.

The job action organized by Unifor at NemaK is an attempt by the union to contain mounting opposition to job cuts and concessions under conditions of growing anger and militancy. Decades of betrayals has eroded workers belief that Unifor represents workers interests.

Dias is fully aware, although he does not share that with the membership, that Unifor has traditionally signed contracts at NemaK—and, indeed throughout the auto industry—that concede the “right” of the corporations to manage their facilities as they see fit, including standard contract clauses outlining plant closure processes and “market conditions” loopholes.

Indeed, in statements released by NemaK management on Thursday, the company said, “The collective agreement was negotiated based on market conditions and volume forecasts in 2016. Those volumes projections and market conditions have changed significantly. This volume development makes the operation not viable...Under the existing labor agreement, NemaK has the right to cease operations under adverse volume conditions with 60-day advanced notice...The collective agreement has full plant closure provisions which NemaK has adhered to.”

The gaping contract language loopholes are never mentioned by Unifor officials nor did they appear in the self-serving “highlights” brochures that are handed out at contract ratification meetings. Often, the

complete contract is not even made available to workers for months and even years after ratification.

Veteran workers in Oshawa will see the union’s posturing about contract language as a familiar trick. At the ratification meetings for the freshly signed GM contract in 2016, Dias waved a piece of paper and claimed that production had been guaranteed in Oshawa for the life of the contract and even beyond. And in 2008, union President Buzz Hargrove claimed the huge array of concessions granted to the company had “saved” jobs at the Oshawa complex, particularly at the truck plant. But only months later, GM announced the truck plant closure, citing changed “market conditions.”

Unifor, like all the nationally-based trade unions, is based on accepting the sanctity of private ownership of the factories, mines, railroads, depots, technologies, etc., by the world’s billionaires. Workers on the other hand have no interest in tying their fate to the defence of the profits of the corporate owners. They must insist that their own needs to jobs and decent living conditions take precedence over profit.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* calls on NemaK workers to take the struggle out of the hands of Unifor through the building of a rank-and-file committee. They must link their fight with autoworkers across the US, Canada and Mexico and beyond, including the 155,000 US autoworkers facing a contract expiration this weekend.

We urge workers interested in learning more about this struggle to contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>