

Unifor selects Ford Canada as target company to establish “pattern contract”

By Carl Bronski
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Unifor President Jerry Dias announced Tuesday that Ford Canada has been selected as the “target company” for negotiating a “pattern contract” for collective agreements covering the 17,000 production and skilled trades workers at the Detroit Three automakers’ Canadian operations.

Despite an overwhelming vote in support of strike action by autoworkers at Ford, General Motors and Fiat-Chrysler (FCA) late last month, Dias’ goal is to conclude yet another concessionary agreement with Ford prior to the Monday, Sept. 21 11:59 p.m. strike deadline. Unifor would then seek to make that agreement the “pattern” in negotiations with GM and FCA.

Dias also announced that the union is seeking to negotiate three-year deals with the auto companies in order to synchronize with the next round of United Auto Worker (UAW) contract renewals with the Detroit Three in the United States in 2023.

Since they split along national lines in 1985, both Unifor (the former Canadian Auto Workers) and the UAW have pitted workers against each other in a never-ending race to the bottom. They have worked with their “own” corporate managements to whip-saw jobs and wages back and forth across borders, while promoting, respectively, Canadian and American nationalism, thereby dividing autoworkers and blocking the emergence of a common struggle against all concessions, job cuts, and plant shutdowns.

Dias’ attempt to synchronize contract years is not designed to unite American and Canadian autoworkers in a common struggle, but rather to continue and deepen the fratricidal scramble of each against all.

Dias has complained that the auto investment pledges the Detroit Three made to the UAW in the 2019 negotiations have drained the well for investments in Canada in this contract round. In other words, he intends to create a situation in 2023 where Unifor and the UAW will go head-to-head to determine which union is capable of offering up autoworkers to the auto bosses for the cheapest price.

In naming Ford as the “target company,” Dias is hoping to

trade off further concessions on work rules and, at best, meagre wage and benefit “increases” in exchange for the automaker giving a new product commitment for the threatened Oakville Assembly Plant. The company employs about 4,500 autoworkers there, and an additional 1,600 workers at its two engine facilities in Windsor. The cornerstone Oakville plant has already experienced almost 1,000 layoffs in just over a year, and is reported to be the Detroit Three plant in Canada most vulnerable to closure in the near future. Industry analysts citing multiple “well-placed sources” have placed a question mark over operations continuing past 2023, when scheduled production runs of the Ford Edge SUV and Lincoln Nautilus are slated to end.

Although Dias evinced “confidence” that new product can be negotiated for the Oakville plant, Ford management was quick to respond on Tuesday that any deal must leave the company “operationally competitive amidst intense global competition.” The company continued, “In light of global economic uncertainties, it’s more important than ever to maintain jobs in Canada. We’ll be asking our employees to work with us to help shape this new reality.”

Unifor is putting Ford in a position to dictate these terms by effectively ruling out strike action. The last strike as part of regular bargaining with the Detroit Three occurred in 1996, and Dias intends to keep it that way. Referring to the impact of the pandemic on the auto sector, Dias said of the current contract fight earlier this year, “no one is going to want a disruption. And I mean nobody; both the workers and the automakers.”

Talking like a corporate consultant, Dias used his press conference to appeal once again to the big business federal Liberal and Ontario Conservative governments to pony up with billions of dollars of subsidies for the automakers, particularly for electric car production. Unifor is currently engaged in close consultation with the Trudeau Liberal government, with Dias meeting with Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland last week, to help it craft a package of measures to revive corporate Canada’s productivity and

profitability.

Giving full voice to the union's Canadian nationalist outlook, Dias urged the Trudeau Liberal government to fund a "national auto strategy." Even if government funding is provided on this basis, it will not save a single job. During the financial crisis of 2008-09, the provision of over \$13 billion by the federal and Ontario provincial governments to the Big Three was used to consolidate their balance sheets and step up the attacks on workers, including by introducing the regressive two-tier wage system.

Moreover, the restructuring of the auto industry is occurring on a global scale. Autoworkers have nothing to gain by supporting their "own" ruling class in this scramble for markets and profitability, which will invariably result in a deterioration in working conditions for autoworkers in every country.

It is expected that vehicle production in Canada by the Detroit Three automakers will fall another 27 percent over the life of the next contract. The latest layoffs at Ford and the lack of new scheduled product will be used as a battering ram to intimidate autoworkers into accepting yet another round of concessions.

The claim made by Unifor, the CAW before it, and the UAW that jobs can be "saved" through concessions has proven to be a cruel hoax. Workers should recall that in the lead-up to the shuttering of the GM Oshawa truck plant in 2010 and the GM Oshawa assembly plant in 2019, Unifor justified the imposition of concessions-laden contracts with the claim that iron-clad guarantees had been secured to keep both facilities open.

In the current round of bargaining, Fiat-Chrysler and General Motors are also intending, with Unifor's connivance, to use threatened job losses to extort givebacks. At FCA's Brampton assembly facility, major investments are needed to retain jobs. Two vehicle models would need to be added at FCA's Windsor Assembly to replace the 1,500 third-shift jobs that were chopped earlier this year. Also under threat is FCA's Etobicoke aluminum casting plant and half of the 1,300 jobs at GM's St. Catharine's propulsion and engine facility.

Autoworkers must recognize that their jobs and livelihoods cannot be defended with nationalist appeals to corporate bosses and capitalist governments to support "their" auto industry. Instead, they must take as their starting point the understanding that they share the same basic interests—secure and decent-paying jobs, workplace safety, an end to two-tier wages—as their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico, and internationally.

In response to the global offensive being waged by automakers to cut costs and increase the pace of work, Canadian autoworkers must establish independent

rank-and-file committees to seize control of the contract struggle from Unifor, unify their fight with autoworkers in the United States and Mexico, and demand the restoration of all concessions and job security for all.

Such a struggle would receive powerful support from autoworkers in the US, who have begun to establish rank-and-file safety committees to combat the dangerous working conditions in the plants jointly imposed by the automakers and the corrupt UAW amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic, and by Mexican autoworkers, who bravely conducted job actions earlier this year to press for the temporary shutdown of the North American auto industry.

Opposition to Unifor's pro-corporate, nationalist course is mounting among rank-and-file workers, as shown by the broad support for a petition demanding that the full details of any agreement Unifor negotiates be made public well before ratification votes. In the past, Unifor has used highly-selected "highlights" brochures to conceal critical information about concessions from rank-and-file workers so as to ensure support for sell-out deals.

A veteran worker at the FCA assembly plant in Windsor wrote to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, "A number of people are concerned about the continued regression of our wages. The erosion of solidarity with the recent hires. The fear of the coronavirus. The lack of concern by the management and union for workers' rights and safety. The list is a mile long."

A recent retiree from the Oakville assembly plant added, "Bargaining for products and investments are not the focus of the majority of Canadian auto workers. And, as we saw from the last contract, future investment is never a guarantee to jobs. We were promised a \$1 billion investment this year. Over the years we have given up raises, vacation pay, sick leave, and benefits for product allocation and investment. These companies will renege on these two issues if they can profit from it."

The worker also addressed the corruption of the UAW, which he insisted is not an exception but the rule. "The thought of these guys selling us out for personal gain has also been a topic of discussion at ratification during the last 4 contract ratification meetings," wrote the worker. "I was not surprised when the UAW leadership was indicted."

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