

As autoworkers mobilize against concession demands

Unifor President Dias attempts to “whipsaw” Canadian auto plants

By Carl Bronski
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Against the backdrop of a growing rebellion among the ranks of autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler Automotive (FCA) and Ford Canada against the sellout pattern “framework” agreement narrowly forced through at General Motors last month, Unifor President Jerry Dias launched a counteroffensive this week, seeking to convince workers that the miserable deal was “the best in a decade.”

Dias, fully cognizant of his real constituency in the corporate boardrooms, chose the Business News Network (BNN) to argue that workers at FCA and Ford should be happy with the deal soon to be placed before them. FCA, the current target in the bargaining process, has a strike deadline of 11:59 p.m. on Monday, October 10. Ford will be the final target after an agreement is reached with FCA.

The GM deal included a miserable 4 percent wage increase over four years (actually a wage cut when inflation is factored in) under conditions of a previous 10-year wage freeze. Further, the settlement contained no cost-of-living allowance. Unifor will now attempt to foist this pattern on the 19,000 autoworkers at FCA and Ford.

The GM settlement cemented the miserable 10-year, two-tier “grow-in” period for new hires and stripped them of any semblance of a defined benefits pension program. As usual, retirees received virtually nothing. All this is under conditions where “new work guarantees” have been exposed as little more than unsecured projections. Meanwhile, the Detroit Three auto companies continue to rake in massive profits.

After Dias’ interview with BNN, the chairs of the union’s FCA and Ford Master Bargaining Committees, Dino Chiodo and Chris Taylor, proceeded to laud the GM settlement. They denounced the thousands of workers who oppose the deal, claiming workers were oblivious to the needs of the union as a whole and failed to understand the importance of pattern bargaining. Both men singled out for criticism Ford Oakville Local 707 President Dave Thomas, who stated this past week that since a deal patterned on the GM settlement would not be ratified by workers at the giant Oakville plant, he will not put it up for a vote by his membership without improvement.

The Unifor bureaucracy is turning the whole notion of pattern bargaining on its head. In long past decades autoworkers in both Canada and the United States, organized in the United Auto Workers, fought militant battles against the auto bosses to establish pattern bargaining in order to ensure that important gains on wages, benefits and working conditions made at one company were reflected across the industry.

Now the Unifor bureaucracy extols pattern bargaining, not because it enables all members to enjoy improved living standards, but for the

precise opposite reason—to impose concessions and give-backs made at one company onto the backs of the entire workforce. In this endeavor, they are employing the same notorious whipsaw tactics that the auto companies have used for decades to speed a race to the bottom.

So concerned is the Unifor officialdom that they may soon lose control in face of growing rank-and-file opposition to their treachery, that on the union’s official AutoTalks2016 Facebook page, they took the unprecedented step of cautioning workers that no strike action can be taken until the union pronounces on the talks at midnight Monday. They not only warned FCA workers, but also Ford workers, who they fear may unite with FCA workers in unauthorized strike action.

Those fears are justified.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* continues to be flooded with new subscription requests from autoworkers disgusted with the pro-company orientation of Unifor. The articles calling for opposition to the pattern and for the formation of rank-and-file committees in the plants are shared widely among workers in all the Detroit Three facilities—in both Canada and among UAW members in the United States.

The growing militancy of autoworkers can also be gauged by an examination of the comments on rank-and-file social media groups that have grown and developed in the past period. A look at one such open page, the Ford Oakville Assembly Plant Workers Facebook group, for example, gives a glimpse into the current mood among a whole layer of autoworkers. The page, initially frequented by local Oakville employees, has rapidly established an audience encompassing not only workers at all the Canadian plants of the Detroit Three, but among workers in the United States as well.

“Greetings from Detroit! I work at the Dearborn Truck Plant and I am hoping for the best for you guys! We didn’t get it! Hope you do! In solidarity,” writes one worker, who then goes on to explain the concessionary terms of last year’s UAW contracts, the three- and even four-tier system now in operation there.

Another worker posted a recent article from the mainstream press announcing “grumbling” over the pattern among Oakville workers. A retiree responded with the much “liked” comment, “Grumbling? How about calling it by its right name ... an out and out rebellion?”

Another post remarked on Unifor’s attempt to characterize opposition in Oakville as selfish because that plant has recently experienced employment growth, “Welcome FCA and GM members, and all reading. Jerry Dias is doing public damage control at every opportunity and downplaying our OAC Local 707 bargaining

committee. He is making it seem as if we don't appreciate the 2,200 new jobs. He fails to mention that the majority of those jobs didn't come from thin air, they came from other plants such as AutoMod being closed (some 500+ jobs lost that as I can gather at better pay rate) and concession contracts where almost all good perks ... for devoting your physical body and life to the assembly line were won by past employees. Jerry is attempting to pit Oakville 707 against Windsor 200 by saying Local 200 bit the bullet so Local 707 would get product and now it's our turn to knob gobble for them. What he doesn't realise is that the majority of members in both plants are awakened and pissed off that this is the 'pattern bargaining' which goes on every contract and the company and national have set it up like this."

An Oakville worker made an astute observation about the possibility of treacherous tactics by the union in the event of a contract rejection. "Jerry Dias will come through with a miracle last second settlement or a phony 2-day strike until there is a tentative agreement. Then we should all be happy and take what they offer, which will be pretty well the pattern agreement from GM. Don't be fooled people. If now is not the time to fight for more, when will it be?"

Indeed, such cynical tactics by the bureaucracy are not new. In 2007, UAW officials in the United States called brief "Hollywood strikes" (just for show) to blow off steam at GM and Chrysler before ramming through a deal containing the hated two-tier wage system.

Another worker succinctly summed up the pattern deal on offer. "A 2% wage increase in the first three years of the contract is a concession, lag on dental plan is a concession, Frozen COLA is a concession, ten year grow-in is a concession, benefit grow-ins is a number of concessions, lump sums are a concession, no PCOLA is a concession, health care premiums a concession, but, Our Leadership says all we had to give up to get all these gains was the Pension Plan. That of course is one huge concession in itself. Winding up the pension plan, no longer will new hires be paying into the current plan, not real comfortable being on the ass end of that. If this is all we can do when all the economic factors are on our side, all the stars lined up just at the right time for bargaining, imagine the future agreements if just one or two of those fall out of our favour."

Another worker wrote, "The bottom line is our Government doesn't care about the employees' health/welfare...they just want GDP/ tax income. Our National Union doesn't care about workers health/welfare...they just want employee dues at any cost. Our companies don't care about employee health/welfare...they just want finished cars and the extra coin to bonus themselves with millions of dollars."

The page is covered with denunciations of Unifor President Dias such as, "Jerry you are an idiot. You should resign if this is the best contract you can get after the big three made record profit and all you get is a promise of future product, which we know they have broken such commitments over and over again."

Workers at FCA plants and from Windsor Ford also weighed in. "I work at Brampton Assembly FCA," said a contributor. "There's lots of talk of the union selling us out but I have to say that I personally haven't seen any union rep or alternate rep on the floor pushing or trying to sell this 'great deal'. Someone was talking to Leon Rideout, the President of our local about how the contract with GM was ridiculous and how he hopes that we didn't get the same deal. Leon didn't agree with him and the conversation turned ugly."

Another remarked, "I work at the Chrysler minivan plant in Windsor. I asked to join your group to pass on some feedback and

share autoworker experiences between our plants. Our local and in plant union office are supportive of the GM agreement and are working hard to sell it on the floor. The members on the floor are not happy with the GM agreement with a small minority exception."

A former Ford engine plant worker took on the notion that "promises" of new investment can be believed. "Windsor was in need of a product at the last set of negotiations. We got a letter of 'consideration' which turned into sweet FA. I am thankful I was given the opportunity to work in Oakville. But go ask any second tier worker what they are 'enjoying'. It's certainly not equal work for equal pay. To me, it's our union's job to protect the workers. It's the government's job to secure investment. Solidarity, people! All of us deserve better."

Such is the growing impact of rank-and-file social media that the official, closed, Unifor Local 707 Facebook page had a post on its site denouncing the Oakville group as being the work of a sinister outsider. The administrators of the rank-and-file group were quick to point out that it is in fact overseen by current and former Ford workers, who, unlike closed pages, support open, wide-ranging and frank discussion.

The growing opposition to Unifor's pattern agreement demonstrates the readiness of autoworkers to mount a counteroffensive against the auto bosses. But if they are to mount a successful fight against all job cuts and concessions, abolish two-tier wages, and restore decent wages, benefits, pensions and working conditions, autoworkers must break politically and organizationally from the nationalist, pro-capitalist Unifor.

Autoworkers should build rank-and-file committees independent of the Unifor apparatus to spearhead an industry-wide strike and fight to rally workers in the US and Mexico in a united struggle to assert the common interests of all workers for decent jobs and pay. In this fight, the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* will offer every possible assistance.

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