

Ford Workers Reject New Concessions — Build a Movement to Change the UAW

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In a historic show of rank-and-file opposition, Ford's 41,000 hourly workers have voted down proposed contract modifications endorsed by the company and the International leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW). The modifications would have removed limits on how many entry-level workers Ford can hire and frozen their wages for six years, as well as placed limits on the right to strike. Entry-level workers earn \$14 an hour, half the wages of full-seniority workers.

The contract was voted down by a decisive majority of 70%, with some union locals rejecting it by over 90%. This was the first national Ford contract to be voted down by UAW members since 1976 (Detroit Free Press, 10/31/09).

Just one day after the final votes were counted, Ford released third quarter numbers showing nearly \$1 billion in profits, which effectively destroyed the “struggling to survive” image that the company had used to justify their demand for more cuts.

The groundswell of opposition to the UAW leadership was organized by numerous small groupings and individual activists at various factories across the country. Using the momentum of this successful opposition, we should urgently organize a conference to launch a broader campaign against any new concessions and to fundamentally transform the UAW and auto industry as a whole.

Pressure to Vote Yes

In organizing opposition to these new concessions, autoworkers had to overcome pressure not only from Ford, but also from the leadership of the UAW.

In the month before the contract vote, the company forced all of its workers to watch a speech by Ford VP Joe Hinrichs called “State of the Business.” It claimed that despite posting profits and increasing market share throughout 2009, the company was still in a precarious position and that workers must be “obsessively focused” on cutting costs. Ford implied that if they couldn't get the same labor costs as General Motors and Chrysler, they may have to file for bankruptcy.

This was followed by a campaign by the UAW International, which sent out representatives over the past two weeks to convince workers to vote for the new concessions. But during these visits, the first signs of opposition began to emerge.

While visiting the Dearborn Truck plant in Michigan, UAW Vice President Bob King was prevented from speaking in favor of concessions on the shop floor. After stopping the assembly line and drawing together several hundred workers, King attempted to address the crowd.

According to UAW activist Ron Lare: “When [Bob King] asked 'Can you hear me?' some shouted 'no.' Then, it was as if they realized what they were saying, and everybody picked it up: 'No! No! No!' with hand-clapping and foot-stomping.”

There was a similar scene in Kansas City, where King was booed multiple times as he made the pitch for concessions. Dearborn Truck and Kansas City voted the contract down by 92% and 93% respectively.

Workers Say Enough

The defeated modifications were the second set of concessions Ford workers have been asked to accept in 2009 alone. In March, we gave up the cost-of-living adjustment, several bonuses and numerous changes in work rules on the promise that these were “temporary” cuts to keep the company afloat. Many workers, fearful of rising unemployment, were willing to accept these cuts.

But after greater concessions were forced out of GM and Chrysler as they received bailout money and went through bankruptcy, Ford began clamoring for more. In the name of competition, Ford attempted to get the benefits of bankruptcy without actually filing for bankruptcy.

At the same time, Ford has been attempting to improve their image as the American auto company that “made the right choices” because they didn't receive any government money.

This media campaign appears to be have worked. Ford's U.S. market share jumped 2.2% in the third quarter and sales in China jumped 63% in the same period. Alongside cost-cutting measures, this explains Ford's \$1 billion in profits over the last three months. They've successfully taken the popular anger at the Wall Street bailouts, and used it to gain market share over the bailed-out auto companies.

Ford arranged for contract voting to finish before these figures were released on November 2nd, but obviously their workers weren't fooled. The decisive “no” vote should be an inspiration to workers at GM and Chrysler, a signal that after years of concessions autoworkers are ready to fight.

What next?

It is significant that we are now seeing the first signs of opposition to the economic crisis in the industry hit first and hit hardest by the crisis. What happens next will have a major impact on the working class as a whole, given the pivotal role that the auto industry continues to play in the U.S. economy.

This contract vote has created a unique opportunity for rank and file UAW activists. We should use the momentum and sense of victory that this has given us to begin building the kind of movement that can turn the UAW into a fighting trade union.

At least 17 different leaflets were independently produced by rank-and-file activists to motivate a No Vote last week. It is inspiring that such semi-spontaneous initiatives were able to humble Ford and the UAW leaders. However, as serious rank-and-file activists will agree, this alone is not sufficient to mount a sustained opposition movement capable of transforming our union.

The activists that helped organize the defeat of this contract should immediately call a conference, open to all auto workers and our allies in the labor movement, to discuss the next steps forward, including developing a common program around which to organize the struggle.

Soldiers of Solidarity, a network of autoworker activists that first developed in 2005 during the struggle at parts maker Delphi, will have an important role to play in this process. The SOS website and email list were key tools for trading information, sharing leaflets and organizing opposition to the recent contract.

A program for rebuilding the UAW should include basic demands for no more concessions and an end to multi-tier wages. But it would also have to deal with the question of what to do with factories facing closure, such as Ford's Twin Cities Assembly Plant, where I work, which is slated to close in 2011.

Workers and community supporters should mobilize to oppose layoffs and factory closures, particularly with the crisis of unemployment and the mounting environmental crisis posing the need for a massive, publicly-funded green jobs program. If the Big Three continue layoffs and plant closures, then these factories should be taken into public ownership and retooled to provide jobs and produce environmentally-friendly vehicles for mass transit. This would be a step toward taking the entire U.S. auto and energy industries into public ownership.

This would be nothing like the semi-nationalization of General Motors, in which the Obama administration has forced even sharper attacks on workers to return GM to the private sector as a profitable company. In contrast, genuine public ownership would mean the companies would be run to meet the needs of humanity and the long-term sustainability of the environment, not the profits of share holders. To ensure this, nationalized companies must be democratically managed by elected representatives of the workforce and wider public.

Voting no on this contract was a huge step forward for autoworkers. But it's only the first step in the struggle to defend jobs and wages. Let's use this moment as a springboard to redevelop the fighting traditions of the UAW and working people in this country.