NEXTEER WORKERS: DON'T ACCEPT ANY MORE DELAYS. THE TIME FOR YOUR STRIKE IS NOW.



BY WILL LEHMAN
Mack Trucks worker and rank-and-file candidate for UAW president

I will be participating in an emergency meeting on the way forward for Nexteer workers and all auto and auto parts workers. The meeting is on Sunday, May 24, at 4:00 pm EDT. For more information and to register, visit: wsws.org/auto-meeting

I want to begin with a simple declaration: what you have accomplished is courageous and deserves the support of every autoworker.

You rejected the first UAW-backed sellout by 96 percent. You rejected the second by 73 percent. When bureaucrats told you a strike was "illegal" and extended your expired contract behind your backs without a meeting, discussion or vote, you organized. When Jason Tuck, the UAW International Servicing Representative making $148,476 a year, came into your hall, cursed workers from the platform and walked out when he realized he could not intimidate you, you stood your ground. You forced the strike authorization vote that every level of the apparatus was determined to prevent, and then voted 86 percent to strike, including 89 percent of production workers.

The ball is in your court now. Do not give it back.

The pattern is already clear. Local 699 responded to your overwhelming strike authorization vote not by preparing a walkout but by posting on Facebook that workers should continue reporting to work and that a strike authorization vote "does NOT automatically" mean a strike. That is not the voice of a union fighting for its members. It is management's voice wearing a union jacket.

The UAW International, silent for weeks while workers rebelled against its representatives, suddenly appeared with a social media post celebrating the vote and announcing a 14-day deadline for another tentative agreement or a strike.

Workers should understand exactly what "14 more days" means. It means fourteen more days for Nexteer to build inventory and fourteen more days for GM, Ford and Stellantis to reduce the leverage that an immediate strike would create. The UAW is not using your strike authorization as a weapon against management. It is delaying action and buying time for management while pretending to fight.

Local officials claim the strike vote strengthens the bargaining committee. But everything that has happened demonstrates that this has not been a negotiation between opposing sides. It has been talks between two parties with a common interest in preventing a strike that could disrupt production across the Midwest and encourage workers at Dana, American Axle, Magna and Bridgewater, whose contracts expire soon, to take similar action.

HOW WE GOT HERE

You did not arrive at poverty-level wages by accident. The conditions confronting workers today are the product of decades of collaboration between the auto corporations and the UAW apparatus.

Parts workers once earned wages close to those of Big Three assembly workers. That changed because the UAW leadership decided it should change. During the 1980s, while UAW officials sat on corporate boards and backed "cost-cutting" programs that

destroyed jobs, wages and pensions, the union deliberately isolated and defeated struggles by parts workers. The goal was to lower labor costs for the automakers.

By 2000, the wage gap between parts workers and assembly workers had expanded from 15 percent to 31 percent.

In 1998, Steven Dawes—then a Local 651 official and today Region 1D director earning $229,813 a year—supported the sellout of the 54-day strike by 9,200 GM workers in Flint. That betrayal paved the way for the spinoff of Delphi and the destruction of jobs, wages and pensions throughout the parts industry, including at the Saginaw Steering Division that later became Nexteer.

As one fourth-generation Saginaw worker explained, union insiders secured transfers to GM assembly plants and protected their benefits while workers like his father “lost everything.”

The tier system forcing new workers to start at $19.50 an hour and wait four years to reach $27 an hour is the direct result of these betrayals. That top wage is essentially the same workers earned more than two decades ago under Delphi. Had wages merely kept pace with inflation, workers would be earning more than $45 an hour today.

Since 1979, nearly 90 percent of Big Three production jobs have disappeared. During the same period, the UAW bureaucracy accumulated more than $1 billion in assets through investments, stock ownership and company-funded programs. The imprisonment of numerous UAW officials for bribery and corruption exposed only the most visible expression of a bureaucracy that has long run the UAW as a business operation rather than a workers’ organization.

Now Shawn Fain, Jason Tuck and the rest of the officials at Solidarity House are telling you to wait another fourteen days.

TAKE AND KEEP THE INITIATIVE

The lesson of every major struggle at this plant is that whenever workers leave the initiative in the hands of the apparatus, the apparatus uses delays, revotes, intimidation and closed-door agreements to impose concessions.

The momentum created by two contract rejections, the strike authorization vote and workers’ resistance to intimidation belongs to the membership.

Workers should immediately form an elected rank-and-file strike committee composed of trusted workers from the shop floor and accountable only to the membership. Such a committee should establish a concrete strike deadline, oversee all information related to negotiations and ensure that workers—not officials—determine the course of the struggle.

The bargaining committee that produced two rejected agreements has forfeited workers’ confidence. There can be no more closed-door negotiations whose results are presented as a finished product.

Do not accept another delay disguised as a deadline. Every day production continues under an expired contract strengthens the company’s position. The time to strike is now.

DEMAND $1,000 A WEEK IN STRIKE PAY

One demand must be raised immediately: $1,000 a week in strike pay from the UAW’s $840 million strike fund.

At current living costs, $500 a week is not meaningful strike support. It is a mechanism for weakening workers’ ability to sustain a struggle. The strike fund exists because workers paid for it through their dues. Every dollar belongs to the membership.

The union should immediately commit $1,000 a week to every Nexteer worker on strike. The full financial resources of the organization—including investments, real estate, Black Lake and Solidarity House—must be mobilized in support of workers fighting for their livelihoods.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Management and its allies have repeatedly threatened workers with plant closure and the transfer of production to Mexico or Poland.

This is one of the oldest weapons used against workers. It succeeds only when workers are divided against one another along national lines and forced into competition over who will accept lower wages and worse conditions.

Mexican workers are not your enemies. Polish workers are not your enemies. They face the same corporations, the same pressures and the same attacks.

The problem is not workers in another country. It is the global corporations that pit workers against one another to maximize profits and the nationalist framework promoted by the trade union bureaucracy that keeps workers divided.

The answer is not accepting lower wages to make Saginaw more "competitive." The answer is solidarity across borders. Nexteer workers in Michigan share common interests with workers in Mexico, Poland and every country where these corporations operate.

This is why the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees exists. Rank-and-file committees must not only be built plant by plant but linked internationally so workers can exchange information, coordinate action and oppose corporate attempts to divide them.

To workers at GM, Ford and Stellantis: Nexteer components are used throughout the industry. When Nexteer workers strike, honor their picket lines and refuse to handle scab parts. Combined action by parts and assembly workers can bring production to a halt.

To workers at American Axle, Dana, Magna and Bridgewater: your contracts are approaching expiration. The bureaucracy will attempt to use the same methods against you. Build rank-and-file committees now.

A strike by Nexteer workers, supported by workers throughout the industry, can become the starting point for a broader industrial and political counteroffensive against job cuts, inequality, war and corporate domination.

WHAT TO FIGHT FOR

- Win back parity pay with Big Three assembly workers.
- Abolish all tiers and establish equal pay for equal work.
- Secure wage increases that exceed inflation and include cost-of-living protections.
- Establish a living starting wage and rapid progression to top pay.
- Defend healthcare benefits.
- Enforce limits on overtime, speedup and surveillance.
- Provide $1,000 a week in strike pay and mobilize the full resources of the strike fund behind this fight.

Brothers and sisters, you have already demonstrated extraordinary courage. You have shown what workers can accomplish when they take matters into their own hands.

This struggle is about more than one contract. It is about who controls the workplace, the union and ultimately society itself—an apparatus tied to management and the political establishment, or the workers who create all wealth.

There are more of us than there are of them.

Strike now. Build the rank-and-file committee. Join the IWA-RFC. Expand the struggle internationally.

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR WORKERS' POWER!

Get involved with the rank-and-file campaign in the UAW elections.

willforuawpresident.org/get-involved