Ford Union Summons Execs To Detroit

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The United Auto Workers union has summoned representatives from Ford factories across the nation to Detroit on Tuesday to discuss contract talks with the automaker.

Union President Ron Gettelfinger confirmed the meeting after a charity appearance in Washington on Thursday night but would not elaborate.

A local union official with knowledge of the meeting said Thursday that no agreement had been reached, but the meeting was called to discuss the labor talks. The official asked not to be identified because the talks are confidential.

"That's internal business, what we do with the national council, but yes we are having that meeting next Tuesday," Gettelfinger said. "Negotiations with our company are what they are, and it's between us and them."

Ford and the union have been in talks since August about contract concessions that would match those granted to Chrysler Group LLC and General Motors Co. before they entered bankruptcy protection. Ford is the only Detroit automaker to avoid bankruptcy court.

Ford CEO Alan Mulally, appearing at the same event as Gettelfinger, also would not say much about the talks, nor would he say if Ford is still after the same deal GM and Chrysler received.

"We are continuing to work with the UAW on all of the elements of competitiveness for Ford," Mulally said. "We have a long and very good track record of working with the UAW on competitiveness at Ford and we expect to continue that progress."

In most cases, a hastily called UAW national council meeting means that union leaders want to present a tentative agreement for factory-level representatives to take back to their members. The exact purpose of this meeting is unclear, but it may have been scheduled to present options to put Ford on a level playing field with its Detroit competitors.

Ford's success relative to GM and Chrysler has put it at a disadvantage in the talks, with many rank-and-file union members opposing further concessions because Ford was healthy enough to stay out of bankruptcy court and avoid taking government aid like GM and Chrysler.

Ford is looking to change work rules, job classifications and other items in an effort to bring its deal to par with those given to GM and Chrysler.

Last week Gettelfinger called the talks with Ford "a delicate balance" between the

company's desire to make changes and UAW workers' potential reluctance to agree to further concessions. Gettelfinger said then that Ford is in a "unique position" due to decisions it made in recent years to leverage assets, borrow about $24 billion, hire a new CEO and design new and improved vehicles that are in showrooms today, or expected next year. Ford turned a $2.3 billion profit in the second quarter of this year, buoyed by $10.1 billion in debt reductions that cut annual interest payments.

"The more successful the company is, the more difficult negotiations are," Gettelfinger said last week. But Gettelfinger also has said in the past that he does not want Ford to be at a disadvantage to its competition.

Ford workers were the first of the Detroit Three to approve contract modifications in March. The changes eliminated cost-of-living increases and performance bonuses in 2009 and 2010 and suspended the jobs bank in which workers were paid indefinitely even though they were laid off.

But then GM and Chrysler ran into serious financial problems and received even deeper benefit cuts and work rule and job classification changes. Since that time, Ford executives have said they didn't want higher labor costs than the other automakers.

Gettelfinger and Mulally appeared together in Washington, D.C., to announce that together they would raise $100 million for the March of Dimes next year.

"We can make sure that every baby has a healthy start," Gettelfinger said during an awards reception.

"We are going to exceed your expectations," Mulally said of the fundraising effort.

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