

Missouri, Michigan Autoworkers Reject Ford Contract

DETROIT (AP) — Autoworkers in Missouri and Michigan overwhelmingly rejected a new contract with Ford Motor Co., a sign that the automaker and the United Auto Workers union are having trouble convincing some workers to accept changes that would lower Ford's labor costs.

Ninety-two percent of workers at the Kansas City Assembly Plant voted against changes to their contract Sunday. The plant, which makes Ford F-150 pickups as well as the Ford Explorer and Mercury Mariner, employs around 3,700 people, or about 9 percent of Ford's 41,000 UAW members.

Workers at plants in Livonia and Plymouth also rejected the changes in recent days, according to Gary Wolkowicz, a member of the UAW bargaining committee at the Dearborn Truck Plant and an outspoken opponent of the changes. The vote at the Sheldon Road plant in Plymouth, which makes climate control systems, was 80 percent opposed, while 52 percent of those voting at the Livonia transmission plant were against the deal.

Ford and the UAW agreed to make changes to their 2007 labor agreement two weeks ago, bringing Ford in line with labor cost cuts already agreed to at General Motors Co. and Chrysler LLC. But workers must ratify the changes for them to go into effect.

Workers would get a \$1,000 bonus if the deal is ratified, but the proposal also would freeze entry-level wages and require some skilled-trades workers to do more than one job. The union also agreed not to strike Ford if the two sides disagree on wage or benefit increases, although the UAW could still strike over other issues.

Jeff Wright, president of UAW Local 249 in Pleasant Valley, Mo., which represents the Kansas City plant, said workers were upset about the wage cap, changes in work rules and the no-strike provision. But he said workers also were angered by local management issues, including a rash of disciplinary hearings in recent weeks.

"I'm sure you've heard that all politics are local," said Wright, who stayed neutral on the changes. "Management, leading up to this, was not conducive to getting a 'yes' vote from our members."

Workers elsewhere have approved the changes. Two factories in Wayne, Mich., and two more in Brook Park, Ohio, near Cleveland have approved the deal. The Wayne plant voted only 51 percent in favor despite getting commitments for two new vehicles. Sixty-one percent of workers in Brook Park supported the deal, Wolkowicz said.

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A message seeking comment was left Monday with the UAW. Ford has said it won't comment on the process until the voting ends.

UAW President Ron Gettelfinger told The Associated Press in an interview before the Kansas City vote that he's pushing the deal because it preserves jobs through product guarantees for several plants. He also believes it helps Ford be competitive and profitable in the future.

But opponents say Ford already is healthier than GM and Chrysler, and that workers need to take a stand and stop accepting concessions.

Voting is scheduled to end Nov. 2, the same day Ford is set to release its third-quarter earnings. At least one analyst has predicted the company will report a profit, adding to opponents' case that the automaker doesn't need further concessions.

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