

UAW officials threaten Socialist Equality Party members

By our reporter
4 October 2007

United Auto Workers (UAW) union officials physically threatened a member of the Socialist Equality Party in Michigan on October 1, and again threatened the same SEP member on October 2.

The attacks occurred as Larry Porter, a writer for the World Socialist Web Site, was distributing a leaflet opposing the tentative UAW-General Motors contract to union members attending local ratification meetings.

The first incident took place Monday, October 1, outside the UAW Local 160 union hall in Warren, where workers from the GM Tech Center were attending an informational meeting. Porter was passing out the leaflet and speaking to workers when he was surrounded by officials from the local and the International union.

A man who identified himself as the chairman of the union sought to prevent workers from taking the leaflet, repeatedly denouncing Porter as a “communist.” Most of the workers ignored the official’s efforts at intimidation and took the leaflet. (UAW Local 160’s web site identifies the “site chairperson” as Larry Erickson.)

As the meeting was set to begin, a man wearing a shirt bearing the UAW International emblem, accompanied by several other men, came up to Porter and told him if he did not leave immediately there would be “trouble.”

Facing an imminent violent attack, Porter left.

The second incident occurred Tuesday, October 2, in Pontiac, outside the UAW Local 594 hall, where an SEP team was distributing leaflets to GM Truck & Bus workers who were voting on the contract. Porter was approached by the same official who threatened him the day before in Warren. The man, speaking into a cell-phone in a voice loud enough to be heard, said, “I’m going to kick this guy’s ass.”

When the official saw that another SEP member had a video camera, he turned and went back into the union hall.

On Wednesday, October 3, the SEP sent a letter to UAW President Ron Gettelfinger informing him of the two incidents. The letter states: “Interference with the SEP’s constitutionally-protected rights is illegal. Members of the Socialist Equality Party do not require the permission of the UAW to peacefully distribute leaflets to members of the union. This is a legal and constitutional exercise of the right

to free speech. Threatened assault against an individual on public property is, however, a crime.

“Were corporations to threaten members of the UAW engaged in organizing drives, your organization would certainly take legal action against those who sought to deprive the union of its democratic right to distribute leaflets on public property.

“It should not be necessary to remind you that the UAW, its executive board members and you personally as union president share legal responsibility for any such actions carried out in violation of the law by union officials. We request that you instruct all officials of the international union and all local union officials to obey the law, and end all threats against members of the Socialist Equality Party, and respect our democratic right to distribute information to union members.”

A third incident occurred on Wednesday, October 3, when officials from UAW Local 735, including its president, Chuck Rogers, attempted to intimidate SEP members distributing leaflets to workers from the GM transmission plant in Willow Run, Michigan.

The red-baiting effort backfired, however, when an older worker walked up to SEP members and, in earshot of the assembled union bureaucrats, declared emphatically, “I believe you have the right to distribute leaflets.” Shortly afterwards, policemen summoned by the union officials came to the scene. They confirmed that SEP members were on a public right-of-way and could continue distributing their material.

The UAW bureaucracy’s thuggery against the SEP is an attack not only on the democratic rights of our party, but on the democratic rights of auto workers. As the World Socialist Web Site has warned, GM workers must be on guard against attempts by the union bureaucracy to employ physical violence against workers opposed to its policies in order to obtain passage of a contract that gives it control over \$60 billion - \$70 billion in retiree health funds.

We call on all auto workers to denounce the UAW leadership’s attacks, call the officials to order, and defend the right of the SEP to distribute information to union members.