

Empty rhetoric from Obama on American Axle strike

By Jerry White
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During a campaign speech in suburban Detroit Wednesday, Barack Obama, the leading Democratic candidate for the US presidential nomination, made several comments about the strike by 3,650 workers at American Axle & Manufacturing.

“Not too far from here, at American Axle, UAW members have gone on strike to fight for good wages and good benefits, and a decent standard of living,” he told the audience at a town hall meeting at Macomb County Community College. “These are things that all hardworking families should expect and that UAW members deserve, and we stand in solidarity with the folks on the picket lines, and the families impacted by this strike.”

He continued by saying that the strike at AAM was part of a broader struggle “to ensure that we have good manufacturing jobs so American workers can raise a family, have health care when they need it, put their children through college, and retire with dignity and security.”

These were the first public remarks by Obama about the strike, although workers have been walking the picket lines for nearly three months. The American Axle strike is one of the longest strikes in the auto industry in decades.

Obama did not propose any assistance to the strikers—many of whom are losing their homes and being forced to live on hand-outs from soup kitchens with nothing but \$200 a week in strike benefits.

Nor did he condemn or propose anything to stop CEO Richard Dauch, who has threatened to close the plants and shift production to Mexico if strikers do not accept a 50 percent wage cut.

American Axle workers should take Obama’s pronouncement of support for what it is: a phony and insincere effort to fool them and maintain the illusion that the Democratic Party speaks for working people. Presuming he is the Democratic Party nominee, Obama will continue to posture as a candidate for working people, even as he defends the basic interests of the corporations and Wall Street.

Obama did not come to Michigan to support the struggles of American Axle workers and other auto workers. Rather his purpose was to strengthen his ties to the auto executives and the United Auto Workers bureaucracy in order to further his campaign for the Democratic nomination.

Before the town hall meeting he visited Grand Rapids, where he picked up the endorsement of former North Carolina senator and rival candidate for president, John Edwards, another Democrat who postures as a friend of the working class.

He also got the backing of two previously uncommitted superdelegates and visited a Chrysler stamping plant in Sterling Heights where he met with Chrysler executives and local UAW officials.

Much of his time was directed at mending fences with the auto industry and the UAW for a speech last year at the Detroit Economic Club, where he criticized the auto companies for producing gas-guzzling vehicles and falling behind their foreign competitors in hybrid technologies and leaving the US dependent on oil imports. The remarks soured relations with the industry and the UAW, both of which oppose increased fuel economy standards.

Reassuring the auto corporations of his support, Obama told a local newspaper reporter Wednesday, “I was honest with people. But Detroit won’t find a better partner than me in the White House.”

While offering nothing to American Axle strikers—or any serious relief for the hundreds of thousands of other working people in Michigan facing job losses, home foreclosures and rising living expenses—Obama said as president he would provide billions more in government subsidies and tax cuts to aid the auto manufacturers. This would include a 10-year \$150 billion federal investment to provide incentives for fuel-efficient cars, as well as billions more for plant conversions and research and development.

Obama gushed, “American automakers have been showing leadership in recent years” and had made strides against Toyota and other foreign competitors. “So we’re certainly taking steps in the right direction.”

On the one hand, Obama claims he supports the struggle of American Axle workers to defend good

wages and good benefits. On the other, he praises the auto companies for taking the right steps to improve their global position.

But the automakers have improved their competitive position precisely by cutting the jobs, wages and living standards of US auto workers. American Axle is only the latest in a long list of companies—from Delphi, to Dana, to GM, Ford, and Chrysler—which, in the name of dumping “uncompetitive labor costs,” have moved to replace higher-paid workers with a cheap labor workforce.

Meanwhile, the UAW, which in the end will support whichever Democratic Party candidate is nominated, is searching for a way to impose major concessions on the workers it claims to represent.

Like the UAW bureaucracy, Obama promotes the myth that the interests of auto workers can be reconciled with the interests of the corporate executives and Wall Street investors, who have enriched themselves at the expense of masses of working people. What flows from his call to arms to “fight” Detroit’s foreign competitors are only new demands that workers sacrifice.

Obama represents a party that has presided over the economic decimation of Detroit. After decades of plant closings, mass layoffs and cuts in social services, Detroit is one of the poorest big cities in America, with massive poverty and an enormous housing crisis.

The Democrats, like the Republicans, are beholden to America’s corporate and financial elite. The Illinois senator has raised nearly a quarter of billion dollars for his presidential run, including from wealthy executives at Ford, GM, Chrysler, Visteon and other

auto companies. The Wall Street banks have given more money to the Democrats than the Republicans this election cycle.

Obama’s backers include Paul Volcker, who as chairman of the Federal Reserve under the Democratic Carter administration in the late 1970s drove interest rates up to double-digit levels in order to deliberately trigger the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

The plant closings and mass unemployment that followed were used by Chrysler and the other Big Three automakers to wrench billions in wage cuts and other concessions from workers and to begin the spiral of corporate downsizing and union-busting—carried out under Democratic and Republican administrations—that has resulted in the destruction of nearly four million manufacturing jobs since 1979.

Other Obama supporters include billionaire investors George Soros and Warren Buffett, who have made fortunes from this process of deindustrialization and the explosive growth of financial speculation that followed.

After years of openly pro-big business policies by the Bush administration and the enormous growth of social inequality, powerful figures within America’s economic and political establishment are concerned the social anger building in the working class could coalesce into a mass movement of opposition to the profit system.

They are looking to Obama—a well-tested defender of the capitalist system—to use populist rhetoric to dissipate social opposition and corral it within the Democratic Party once again.