GM throws down the gauntlet to auto workers

Editorial Board
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General Motors has broken off talks with the United Auto Workers in the strike which has shut most of the company's North American assembly plants and affected nearly 180,000 workers. GM is hardening its position by seeking a ban on local strikes, essentially demanding that auto workers end all resistance to the company's drive to slash jobs and speed up production in its factories.

The *Washington Post* reported Monday that GM is now considering outright closure of the two parts plants in Flint where 9,200 workers are on strike. 'The automaker now may be willing to risk an all-out labor war,' the *Post* said, 'to achieve cost-cutting goals.'

Other measures reported under consideration by GM management are a federal court injunction to declare the strikes illegal and cutting off health care coverage for laid-off workers.

GM's top negotiator made it clear that the company would not subordinate investment decisions to what it regards as secondary concerns, such as the workers' interest in job security and the maintenance of decent wages and working conditions. Vice President Gerald Knechtel said that the strike 'is for bad reasons. It's for reasons involving demands to put investment into a noncompetitive business and the company is not going to do that.'

As it has throughout the strike, the company's inflexible position appeared to take union officials by surprise. The *New York Times* reported that the union had agreed informally to increase the work load for the 600 engine cradle welders--a key issue at the Flint Metal Fabricating plant--and that union leaders had booked an auditorium for a ratification meeting last weekend, only to have the prospective agreement collapse.

The company suddenly demanded that the union settle disputes at parts plants in Dayton, Ohio, and Indianapolis and at the Buick City assembly plant in Flint, where strike authorization votes have been taken over the past month, and that the UAW pledge no further paralyzing local strikes until the expiration of the national union contract in September 1999.

A struggle against the market

The stiffening of the company's position raises serious questions about the policy of the UAW, which has sought to utilize the strike to appeal to GM to adopt what the union bureaucracy considers a 'more reasonable' position. GM officials and Wall Street analysts have declared, on the contrary, that the greater the impact of the strike, the more the company is compelled to cut costs and eliminate unprofitable operations in order to offset the financial losses.

The largest corporation in America is declaring that its operation as a capitalist concern in a market economy is incompatible with the basic needs of the workers. There is no reason for workers to be intimidated by such an argument: it simply underscores the need for a strategy to defend jobs, living standards and working conditions which does not accept the limits of the market, but in fact challenges the legitimacy of the market as the supreme ruler over workers' lives.

The dilemma facing auto workers is that the UAW rules out any thought of such an anti-capitalist policy. There is no more fervent defender of the market economy than the bureaucracy in Solidarity House, which is committed by both its political ideology and its material interests to the maintenance of the profit system.

The decay of the UAW

It has not always been this way. When it was first built in the 1930s, the UAW, of all the major industrial unions, was most closely linked to a struggle to combine militant trade union action with political action directed against the power of big business and for a radical social policy, based on the redistribution of wealth and social justice.

This was abandoned during World War II, as a layer of privileged officials was consolidated in the union. This bureaucratization culminated in the late 1940s in the purge of radicals and socialists, spearheaded by Walter Reuther, which drove out of the union hundreds of the militant workers who had played a leading role in the great sitdown struggles a decade earlier.

In the UAW and the other newly established industrial unions, the officials secured government and corporate sponsorship for the bureaucratic apparatus--'union security' clauses, the dues checkoff, labor participation on government boards, etc.--in return for limiting the unions' activities to a narrow economic sphere and encouraging workers to concentrate on immediate paycheck gains, rather than broader social issues.

The UAW under Reuther pioneered programs such as company-paid medical care, pensions and other benefits, limited to union members and retirees only, rather than seeking the establishment of a national health care program providing benefits to all working people, which would have required a broader political struggle.

This dovetailed with Reuther's policy of reintegrating the CIO unions with the reactionary AFL, and subordinating the labor movement as a whole to the big business-dominated two-party system. The UAW, which had been committed to the establishment of an independent labor party through the first decade of its existence, and sponsored a labor candidate for mayor of Detroit, became one of the main pillars of the Democratic Party.

The dimensions of this transformation are indicated in the recent account of this period by one perceptive historian:

'By forging an alliance with the Democratic party and the liberal state, and by abandoning such larger goals as the industrial-council plan or the idea of a labor party, organized workers gave up the chance of becoming an independent political movement. More than that, they forsook the struggle to win a significant redistribution of wealth and power within the industrial economy--the chance to create

a genuine industrial democracy. For in its new partnership with Democrats, liberals, and the state, trade unions were destined to be a subordinate force, incapable of shaping the liberal agenda in more than marginal ways. Before the war, the labor movement had included a substantial faction of militant, crusading workers promoting advanced, often radical, approaches to economic reform. By 1945, the movement was on its way to assuming its modern form as a highly bureaucratized (and occasionally corrupt) interest group, with relatively narrow (and at times illiberal) aims, committed mainly to its own institutional survival.' [Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform* , Random House, New York, 1995, p. 224]

The road to corporatism

In the 1950s and 1960s Reuther encouraged workers to accept automation on the company's terms, trading off jobs for higher wages, rather than raise the issue of how the introduction of new technology, with enormous increases in productivity, could benefit the working class as a whole, both by raising living standards for all workers and by shortening the working day.

As the world position of American capitalism and the American auto industry eroded, the UAW's policy slipped from class compromise to outright corporatism, subordinating the interests of auto workers to an increasingly desperate struggle by the Big Three auto makers for survival.

In the Chrysler bailout, the first deep cuts in wages and benefits were imposed on auto workers in the name of saving the company. Chrysler returned to profitability, at the expense of tens of thousands of lost jobs. The concessions bargaining spread to GM in 1982, and then to Ford. Out of this emerged the policy of labor-management 'partnership,' in which union officials became the policemen enforcing speedup and downsizing, in the name of 'competitiveness,' and the UAW was transformed, in all but name, into a company union.

A hallmark of this period was the UAW's descent into the crudest forms of economic nationalism and American chauvinism. This was already implicit in Reuther's embrace of American foreign policy during the Cold War, and the direct collaboration of the UAW with the CIA in operations against radical and Stalinist-led trade unions overseas. In the 1980s this chauvinism took on increasingly grotesque forms, as the UAW openly encouraged anti-Asian racism and was unable to maintain the longstanding linkage of American and Canadian workers employed by the same companies, provoking the breakaway of the CAW.

Which way forward?

This protracted degeneration has left workers without a strategy for fighting the auto companies and without a mass organization through which such a strategy could be implemented. But as the Flint strikes have begun to show, the transformation of the UAW has not put an end to the class struggle. Growing numbers of workers recognize the complete inadequacy of the old organization and the reactionary role of its leadership.

The GM strike raises fundamental issues before auto workers and all working people: Who controls industry? Who makes investment decisions? Who decides that cities like Flint or Dayton will be devastated economically? Why must these decisions be determined by the interests of a handful of big shareholders, and not democratically, in the interests of the working class a whole?

GM has a strategy rooted in the new realities of the global marketplace. It is prepared to risk billions in short-term losses in order to effect a reorganization of its factories and work force along the lines demanded by the big investors and money managers. Auto workers require a new strategy which does not, ostrich-like, ignore the implications of the global economy, or succumb to chauvinist prejudice against workers in other countries.

But the UAW bureaucracy bases its maneuvers on entirely short-term considerations which do not permit even a discussion of an alternative strategy, let alone the broad political struggle which is required to reach wider layers of workers in the United States, as well as the GM strikers' co-workers in Mexico, Canada and throughout the world. Left to the leadership of UAW President Yokich and Solidarity House, the GM strike will inevitably be betrayed and the workers defeated.

The only basis for waging an intransigent and effective struggle against General Motors is to recognize the connection of this strike to the growing movement of the working class internationally against the impact of the world economic crisis of capitalism.

Whether it is Air France workers or Australian dockers or auto workers in South Korea and America, the working class is waging battle after battle against globally organized capital. This struggle can only be successful if it is waged on a global basis, uniting the efforts of workers across national boundaries.

The issues posed by the auto workers' strike are political, and they can only be decided through a political struggle, through the organization of an independent political party of the working class which will challenge the domination of big business. This party must adopt a program which is socialist and internationalist, putting on the agenda a radical reorganization of economic life and society as a whole in the interests of working people. That is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.

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