

UAW officials take an auto worker for a ride

Jerry White
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Anyone who has seen American gangster movies knows what it means when a mafia enforcer takes his victim for a ride. If the unhappy individual is lucky enough to survive, he gets an unforgettable message: do what you are told ... or else.

Last March officials from the United Auto Workers (UAW) in Dearborn, Michigan took an auto worker for just such a ride. Their victim was Brian Papke, a survivor of last February's explosion at the Ford Rouge power plant. Their aim was to get Papke to stop speaking out about hazards at the facility that led to death of six of his co-workers.

Papke, a 45-year-old instrument repairman, barely escaped injury in the blast. He made a courageous attempt to save one worker, who later succumbed to his injuries.

Papke was certain the explosion was not a mere "accident." He decided to make public what he knew about unsafe conditions in the facility, and in the days following the blast he spoke with newspaper and television reporters. He frequently spoke about these issues with other workers, as well as safety experts and legal advisers on an Internet discussion group, making it clear he believed Ford had put its profits before workers' safety.

Unknown to Papke, his comments were being monitored. Throughout this period Ford was attempting to conceal prior safety problems in the plant, and the UAW was warning workers not to talk about plant conditions. Publicly, high-ranking Ford and UAW officials were defending the company's safety record and denying that the explosion had anything to do with years of downsizing and cost-cutting. Papke and others who spoke out were a thorn in their sides.

According to a February 1 article in the *Detroit Free Press*, one day last March a union representative approached Papke in a Ford Rouge cafeteria and said simply, "Let's go for a ride." Because he was on

involuntary layoff after the blast and awaiting reassignment to another Ford facility, Papke assumed this was about a new job, and followed the union official to his car. He had no idea where they were going until the official pulled up to the office of a psychiatrist on Michigan Avenue. Although he did not know the doctor, the psychiatrist had apparently been fully briefed about Papke.

"He told me I was obsessed with the power plant, that I needed to stop talking to people about it," Papke said. "They told me to stop writing those letters on the Internet." He also told Papke that he needed to go on medication and take a medical leave. "I almost went for it," Papke said, but he resisted.

Later he told other workers about the incident. "They thought it was screwy. Usually, the company tries to get you *off* medical leave, not on it," Papke said. He concluded, "With me being an insider and knowing the building and stuff, they didn't want me going public with my knowledge."

What is the proper description of such actions by UAW officials? At the least, they border on criminal activity. Union officials conspired with Ford management to intimidate and silence a worker, and if that did not work, to use the services of an unscrupulous doctor to drug him with medication.

In the history of the labor movement such gangsterism has played a prominent and lamentable role. In the 1930s these methods were used by the auto bosses against the courageous workers who fought to organize the UAW at Ford, General Motors and other corporations. The auto magnates employed spies and thugs to terrorize and silence union supporters. This was particularly true of Henry Ford, the Nazi supporter, who employed a private army of 8,000 goons—the so-called Ford Servicemen, led by Harry Bennett, well known for his connections to the Detroit mafia.

To fight for the UAW meant taking your life into

your own hands. UAW supporters were forced to carry out underground work to avoid detection and retribution. So tight was Ford's anti-union hold on the city of Dearborn that when Walter Reuther and other UAW organizers came to the Rouge plant to pass out union leaflets in full view of news cameras, Bennett's thugs beat them up in the so-called "Battle of the Overpass" of 1937.

In many ways the tragedy of the American labor movement is summed up in the fact that today the organizations which previous generations of workers struggled and sacrificed to build have taken on the functions of the company goons and gangsters against whom the UAW pioneers fought sixty years ago. Ford workers who speak out against the conditions on the shop floor are subjected to threats and intimidation, not from Ford's servicemen, but from the UAW.

How has this happened? The bureaucratized, pro-company outfits that presently constitute the "organized labor movement" in America are the product of a protracted process of degeneration. A key juncture in that decline was the anti-communist purges carried out by the Reuther brothers and others in the 1940s and 1950s. By the 1980s the unions had openly embraced corporatism. Today they function as little more than an extension of corporate management.

The basic political physiognomy of the UAW remains the same today as it was during the Cold War, above all its fear of socialism and hatred of its Marxist opponents. One aspect of the Brian Papke episode underscores this fact. Papke was told by UAW officials to stop sending letters to the "socialist web site." It is clear that the UAW's retaliation was in direct response to their suspicion that Papke was sending letters to the *World Socialist Web Site*. On March 11, the WSWS posted several letters from "BP," a correspondent who identified himself as a "Ford power plant employee." These letters provided details of Ford's negligence towards safety and charged that the company's "greed killed six of my co-workers." Within days of the appearance of these letters Papke was taken for a ride.

The UAW was complicit in imposing unsafe conditions at the Ford Rouge power plant and ignoring the warnings of workers of an impending disaster. To protect Ford from criminal charges and liability, and cover up their own corrupt relations with management, the UAW officials sought to silence their own

members, by whatever means necessary.

The fact that the union bureaucracy has contempt for the democratic rights of its members is not a revelation. But one additional point should be made. For years, the UAW and AFL-CIO bureaucracy used anti-communism and red-baiting as weapons in their struggle against the influence of socialists and class conscious workers in the trade unions. But the methods they use against their members echo those employed by Stalin's heirs in the former Soviet Union, who often sent opponents to asylums for "psychiatric treatment" and drugging.

The affinity of methods is no mere coincidence. From a sociological standpoint, the UAW officialdom and the old Stalinist apparatchiks represent similar phenomena—petty-bourgeois layers of a parasitical type, whose privileges and social status depend on their oppression and betrayal of the working class.



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