

Career spanned rise and decay of US auto union

Former UAW President Leonard Woodcock dies

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On January 16 Leonard Woodcock, president of the United Auto Workers from 1970-77 and later US ambassador to China under President Jimmy Carter, died in Ann Arbor, Michigan at the age of 89. An official in the UAW for nearly 40 years, Woodcock's life encompassed the transformation of the union from a militant mass movement of the working class into a bureaucratic apparatus, alien and hostile to the workers it supposedly represents.

Woodcock was born in Rhode Island in 1911, the son of British immigrants. He joined the Socialist Party at a youthful age. His involvement in the trade union movement began in the 1930s, when he got a job at a Detroit auto plant. In 1938 and 1939 he served as an education director for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the Detroit area.

This was a period of social upheaval that saw general strikes, plant occupations and confrontations with the police and national guard troops. In the space of only a few years the previously atomized American working class organized into powerful industrial unions. In Flint, Michigan, autoworkers seized and held General Motors factories in a crucial breakthrough that forced the largest US car company to recognize the UAW.

These leaders of these struggles were rank-and-file militants, many of whom were inspired by the ideals of socialism and communism. For its part the fledgling UAW and CIO bureaucracy did everything within its power to channel this potentially revolutionary movement into the safe harbor of trade union reformism and support for the Democratic Party. It opposed a break by the newly formed industrial union movement from the capitalist two-party system through the formation of a labor party. Instead it sought to line workers up behind Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt and later behind the US imperialist intervention in WWII.

Woodcock quit the Socialist Party in 1940 over its opposition to US involvement in the war in Europe. That

same year he obtained an appointment as an international representative in the UAW bureaucracy. By 1946 he became an administrative assistant to Walter Reuther, after the latter's election as UAW president. Woodcock supported Reuther's witch-hunt of socialists and militants in the union during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1955 Reuther made Woodcock UAW vice president in charge of the General Motors department. When Reuther died in a plane crash in May 1970, Woodcock was able to carry a narrow vote on the UAW's executive board to win the presidency of the union.

Within months of his taking office a strike erupted against General Motors that lasted a record 67 days. The walkout forced GM to restore the cost of living escalator, which Reuther had surrendered in previous negotiations. This, as it turned out, was the last major contract struggle by the UAW in which workers made any appreciable gains. In 1971 President Nixon cut the gold backing from the US dollar and announced a 90-day wage freeze, signaling the abandonment of the policy of social reformism pursued by the American ruling class since the end of WWII. Woodcock joined the pay board set up by Nixon to hold down wages, but was later forced to resign along with AFL-CIO President George Meany and other union officials because of massive opposition within the working class.

Workers bitterly resisted the attempts by the Nixon administration to destroy wages and working conditions. At the Lordstown General Motors plant in Ohio workers walked out against speedup, only to be betrayed by Woodcock, who sent them back to work with no improvements in conditions. At the Norwood, Ohio assembly plant GM workers went out on a 174-day strike. At one stormy meeting of workers from the plant Woodcock was pelted with eggs and tomatoes.

In late 1973 the United States entered into its deepest recession since the 1930s, threatening the jobs of tens of thousands of autoworkers. Woodcock refused to mount any struggle, and instead offered laid off workers counseling on

obtaining food stamps and unemployment benefits. The UAW president joined with the management of the Big 3 auto manufacturers to lobby the Nixon and Ford administrations for a tax cut for the car companies and a five-year moratorium on new pollution and safety standards. At the same time he sought to integrate the union into the structure of management by establishing programs such as “Quality of Work Life” at GM.

Woodcock feared and hated militant workers, especially those who were socialist opponents of the UAW bureaucracy. Jim Lawrence, a former autoworker at the GM's Delco Moraine brake plant Dayton, Ohio, and a long time supporter of the Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor, the Workers League, recalled his encounters with Woodcock in the mid-1970s.

“I once cornered Woodcock on the floor of a UAW convention and asked him about the policies of the Nixon administration. He said he hadn't seen Nixon do anything that indicated he was anti-labor. Later Woodcock came down to Dayton to support the local officials we were running against in the union elections. There was a lot of militancy among workers back then and we were winning a lot of support. A lot of workers supported shortening the workweek to defend jobs. Woodcock came down from Detroit because he thought we might upset his supporters at the local. He singled us out because we were socialists. We were told to come down to the union hall for a meeting with Woodcock, but we refused to go unless we could go with a group of workers. We figured there would be threats.”

Woodcock became an object of hatred and derision among militant rank-and-file autoworkers.

Finally forced to call a rally against unemployment, Woodcock turned it into a platform for the Democratic politicians. The UAW and AFL-CIO attempted a similar rally in Washington, DC, in April 1975, but it ended up a fiasco for the bureaucracy. When former Democratic vice president Hubert Humphrey tried to speak, workers stormed the platform and drove the Democrats and the union bureaucrats from the microphone.

This opposition from the working class did not stop the turn to the right by the UAW leadership. On the contrary, Woodcock sought to integrate the union even more closely to the Democratic Party, embracing the campaign of Jimmy Carter, the governor of a southern “right-to work” state, for the US presidency.

Retiring in 1977, Woodcock left behind a legacy of collusion with the employers and the government, which would be taken to even greater lengths by his successors, Douglas Fraser, Owen Bieber and current UAW president, Stephen Yokich. In the Chrysler bailout in 1979-80 the UAW would accept mass layoffs and wage cuts in exchange

for a seat on the board of directors. Over the next two decades, from the racist campaigns against Japanese imports, to the abandonment of company-wide strikes and “no contract, no work,” to the adoption of labor-management partnerships, and the blocking of struggles against plant closings and mass layoffs, the union would be transformed over the next two decades into little more than management's police force on the shop floor. By the early 1990s the assets of the UAW bureaucracy topped \$1 billion, although membership of the union had fallen by half since the time of Woodcock's departure.

After leaving the union Woodcock was asked by President Carter to lead a commission to Vietnam and Laos to negotiate the return of the remains of missing US servicemen. Carter later made him US envoy and then ambassador to China, where he encouraged the pro-capitalist policies of the Chinese Stalinists and negotiated the terms of full US diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic. He left government service in 1981 with the defeat of the Democratic Carter administration and took a teaching position at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. There he continued his services to corporate America by participating in a US State Department project forging ties between the US and Chinese auto industries, and as late as 1992, he helped negotiate agreements with China to buy American made vehicles.

At a White House function several months before Woodcock's death former president Carter praised the ex-UAW leader for his role in negotiating the first trade agreement with China. The seamless transition of Woodcock, from the leader of the UAW to an operative of US imperialism, was by no means unusual. It was the same path taken by numerous officials from the AFL-CIO and UAW bureaucracy, whose careers in the labor movement had been chiefly dedicated to stifling the struggles of the working class and defending the interests of American capitalism.



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