

US auto union rallies behind Ford bosses

UAW lackeys on parade

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Washington, DC on Tuesday was the scene of a degrading spectacle—a flag-bedecked convoy of Ford Explorers driven by United Auto Workers bureaucrats demonstrating their support for Ford against the tire maker, Bridgestone/Firestone.

Led by a police escort, the union convoy drove through the capital, honking horns, waving American flags and shouting, “We build safe cars!” In fact, with the exception of a smattering of rank-and-file workers, those doing the honking and shouting make it a practice of staying as far away from the factory floor as they possibly can. Denizens of local union halls, regional UAW offices and the grotesquely misnamed “Solidarity House” national headquarters, they build nothing but beer bellies and expense accounts.

Media reports describing the spectacle as a mobilization of auto workers were false. It was a rally of, by and for the union bureaucracy. The last thing the UAW leadership would contemplate is an action bringing together a large number of rank-and-file workers, even in pursuit of a reactionary policy. They are petrified of the workers whom they ostensibly represent.

The stunt was paid for by Ford, which gave the participants three days off with full pay, and covered all their expenses.

Later Tuesday the UAW held an “Explorer safety confidence” rally on Capitol Hill, where UAW Vice President Ron Gettelfinger, Michigan Congressman John Dingell and other Democratic politicians praised the automaker and the UAW for building the best and safest vehicles in the world. A number of speakers denounced Firestone for producing faulty tires.

The UAW demonstration was a sideshow to the main event, taking place in the Capitol, where Ford CEO Jacques Nasser defended the Explorer sport utility

vehicle before a congressional panel investigating 208 US deaths and more than 700 injuries linked to tread separations on Firestone tires, mostly mounted on Explorers. The UAW leadership was there to cheer on the boss, who was lobbing recriminations against his counterpart at Bridgestone/Firestone, John Lampe, inside the hearing room.

Federal safety regulators, who have been focusing on quality problems with the Firestone tires, are now considering an investigation into steering and stability problems on the Explorer. In his testimony Nasser repeated the company mantra, “This is a tire issue and only a tire issue.” But Lampe presented evidence that Explorers had a much higher rollover rate than other sport utility vehicles, pointing out that Explorer rollover fatalities continued to mount in Venezuela even after Ford replaced the Firestone tires. Lampe called Ford’s recent decision to replace another 13 million Firestone tires an attempt to make Firestone a “scapegoat” and hide serious safety problems with the Explorer.

It has been widely reported that even before the Explorer first appeared in the early 1990s, Ford executives knew that it performed poorly on rollover tests, but they ignored safety improvements suggested by engineers because their implementation would have delayed the launch date of the vehicle, which was expected to generate huge profits. Instead, Ford recommended that Explorer owners inflate their tires well below the pressure recommended by Firestone. This stopgap exacerbated the tread separation problem.

For workers and the general public, it is not a matter of taking sides in this public bloodletting between two corporate giants. The evidence assembled thus far provides ample grounds for bringing charges of criminal negligence against both companies.

For the UAW bureaucracy, however, the death and suffering caused by cost-cutting moguls driven by the drive for profit is of no concern. They leap to Ford's defense because trouble for the master means trouble for his lackeys.

As they parroted the company line they did not even attempt to back up their claims with evidence that the Explorer is safe. With their blanket endorsement of the Explorer they implicate the UAW in a corporate cover-up and, what is worse, besmirch the workers they claim to represent.

To the rank and file, UAW officials depict their intervention as a campaign to defend Ford workers' jobs. Here the record speaks for itself. Over the past 20 years the UAW has allowed the Big Three automakers to destroy 368,000 jobs, including 80,000 at Ford. As a result of the bureaucracy's policy of collaboration and accommodation, UAW membership has been halved.

Auto workers should ask themselves: when in recent memory has the UAW bestirred itself to defend a victimized worker? The contrast between the union's concern for corporate management and its indifference to the fate of auto workers could not be more stark.

The past two decades are littered with the remains of smashed UAW locals and broken strikes, more often than not the product of betrayals engineered by the union leadership. Only recently the UAW International cut the strike pay and medical benefits of workers in Henderson, Kentucky who have been on strike for more than two years. When it comes to pulling Jacques Nasser's chestnuts out of the fire, however, the UAW leadership is at the ready.

The UAW is motivated by one thing—the protection of the privileges and posts of the union bureaucracy. As always, its prostration before big business discredits the ranks of labor and implicates them in the social crimes of the corporate oligarchy. In this way the labor bureaucracy undermines confidence in the working class among broad layers of the population who are looking for a force capable of opposing the predations of big business.

The guiding perspective of the UAW bureaucracy is corporatism. According to this outlook, the working class has no interests separate from those of the corporate owners. Anything that is bad for the boss is bad for the worker. This is a formula for the utter prostration of the working class.

The corollary of corporatism is collaboration in attacking the jobs and living standards of the working class, and pitting one section of workers against another. Thus the UAW feels no compunction in joining Ford's campaign to destroy Firestone, which, if successful, would eliminate thousands of tire workers' jobs. This is nothing new for the UAW bureaucracy, which has for years played one section of auto workers against the other, in a fratricidal competition over which section would give the company greater concessions. This, in practice, is how the UAW "saves jobs."

In return for its collaboration in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, the shutdown of scores of factories and the implementation of speedup, the UAW bureaucracy has obtained access to hundreds of millions of dollars in joint labor-management funds. Even as union membership fell by more than 50 percent, the Solidarity House bureaucracy was able to increase its assets to over \$1 billion. "The real story is that we've become partners in some of the most profitable companies in the world—DaimlerChrysler, Ford and General Motors," UAW President Stephen Yokich declared during the last round of labor negotiations in 1999.

The bureaucracy's collaboration with management has also produced deadly conditions inside Ford's factories. In February of 1999 an explosion at the Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan killed six power plant workers. Prior to the disaster, plant workers told UAW representatives of dangers from deteriorating equipment and lack of maintenance at the antiquated facility, but the union ignored the warnings. Within hours of the explosion, Ron Gettelfinger, who led Tuesday's UAW demonstration in Washington, rushed to the defense of the company, proclaiming the power plant "one of the safest facilities in Ford's system."



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