

US auto union defeated at Japanese transplant

Another debacle for the UAW

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The United Auto Workers (UAW) suffered a devastating defeat Wednesday when workers at Nissan's assembly plant in Smyrna, Tennessee voted 3,103 to 1,486 to reject the union's bid to organize the factory. The union did no better than it did in 1989, when it was defeated by a 2-to-1 margin. In the 1990s the union abandoned two other efforts to organize the plant because of insufficient support.

The resounding defeat cannot be attributed to a lack of militancy among the workers or the absence of antagonism towards the company. There is widespread concern among Nissan workers, many of whom are reaching their 40s, over rising injury rates, victimizations, and the lack of retirement benefits. Anxiety over job security has been heightened by the deepening economic crisis and slump in the auto industry, which has led to the layoff of tens of thousands of auto workers and the idling of several factories in North America.

Under these conditions, if Nissan workers had believed the UAW would fight to defend their jobs and conditions, they would have given the union strong support.

The fact that the union lost so badly underscores how discredited the UAW is in the eyes of wide layers of the working class. Why should workers vote for a union that has failed to defend hundreds of thousands of its own members' jobs?

This year alone DaimlerChrysler has announced 26,000 permanent job cuts without the slightest resistance from the UAW. General Motors and Ford have followed with their own job-cutting announcements.

Since the September 11 terror attacks, in particular, the UAW has acceded to layoffs and the idling of plants without even a verbal protest. Within days of last

month's tragic events, UAW President Stephen Yokich joined CEOs from General Motors, Ford and Chrysler at an "auto summit" in Detroit, which President Bush's labor secretary described as "an unprecedented display of unity." Yokich said of the gathering, "We're here to see what we can do, labor and management, working together."

The UAW defeat at Nissan was the denouement of the UAW's longstanding policy of corporatism. According to this outlook—officially adopted as the union's guiding principle in the early 1980s—workers have no interests separate and apart from those of corporate management. Accordingly, the task of the UAW is to boost productivity, assist management in cutting costs and imposing whatever measures are necessary to increase competitiveness against foreign-based rivals. In keeping with this policy the UAW bureaucracy has all but abandoned the strike weapon and isolated and then betrayed the few strikes it has allowed. It has all but scrapped any protection for its members on the shop floor, and helped management pit worker against worker in a fratricidal struggle over a dwindling number of jobs.

The UAW has joined with management in establishing a myriad of corporatist structures, including labor-management committees, training funds and joint investments. The union has blocked any struggle against plant closings and mass layoffs that might disrupt these relations.

Despite the loss of half its membership since the late 1970s, the lucrative relations the UAW established with the auto bosses has enabled the union hierarchy to maintain its assets at over \$1 billion. Yokich boasted about these relations in 1999 when he declared, "The real story is that we've become partners in some of the most profitable companies in the

world—DaimlerChrysler, Ford and General Motors.”

Given the fact that the UAW relentlessly promotes itself as a partner of the auto bosses—in union literature, on billboards, in TV commercials—is it any wonder that Nissan workers should vote against paying a substantial portion of their paychecks, in the form of union dues, to support what is in effect a second layer of management? Auto workers in Tennessee already have the existing management to contend with. Why should they pay to add a layer of management stooges?

According to several reports, UAW officials thought they would win the vote at Nissan and were shocked by the results. After the defeat Bob King, the UAW vice president for organizing and leader of the Smyrna campaign, told the press, “I thought it was going to be a lot closer.”

The bureaucracy’s astonishingly wrong pre-vote assessment only underscores how isolated and distant the UAW bureaucracy is from the sentiments of the working class. The bureaucrats at the union’s Detroit headquarters were undoubtedly listening to paid functionaries in Tennessee, who told their superiors what they wanted to hear. As for those with whom the UAW had close contact in the plant, one can safely assume they included opportunist layers hoping to get a position in the union apparatus.

The failure of the UAW to organize Nissan is the consequence of its own reactionary policies. In addition to its record of labor-management collaboration, the UAW has a long history of anti-Asian demagoguery that may have played a role in alienating workers employed by a Japanese car company.

The UAW is increasingly seen as bureaucratic, authoritarian and corrupt. One of the major preoccupations of the union bureaucracy is defending itself against members who have filed lawsuits charging embezzlement and other corrupt practices by local and international officers.

The defeat at Nissan will intensify the crisis wracking the UAW. While the Big Three US carmakers have continued to downsize, Japanese, Korean and German manufacturers have added employees at factories in the US. The UAW has repeatedly failed to organize any of these so-called transplants, including the new Mercedes factory in Vance, Alabama. The only plants with foreign owners where the UAW is recognized are those that function as joint ventures with US carmakers.

The UAW is a moribund organization that exists by the good graces of the Big Three auto companies and sections of the business and political elite, which value it as an instrument for suppressing the class struggle and keeping the working class trapped within the framework of the capitalist two-party system.

Increasingly, however, corporate interests—recognizing the limited and tenuous influence the union has over workers in the industry—may decide to dispense with the UAW’s services altogether. Undoubtedly this was one of Yokich’s concerns when he nervously asserted that the Nissan vote “does not change the constructive relationships” the union maintains with US automakers.

The debacle at Nissan reveals the true nature of the UAW. Far from being a genuine workers’ organization, it is an instrument of a corrupt bureaucracy that is hostile to the working class.



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