

Career bureaucrat named president of US auto union

Gettelfinger defended Ford in 1999 blast that killed six workers

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14 June 2002

The installation of Ronald Gettelfinger as the president of the United Auto Workers union is a fitting demonstration of the moribund character of the organization, which has lost over half of its membership in the last three decades. A functionary within the UAW apparatus for nearly a quarter of a century, Gettelfinger's name is virtually unknown among rank-and-file autoworkers, let alone the working class as a whole, since he never led a struggle against the auto companies.

Gettelfinger climbed up the ladder of the UAW bureaucracy by serving Ford Motor Company, first as a local official at Ford's truck plant in Louisville, Kentucky, then as a director of the UAW's Kentucky-Indiana region. Since 1998 he has headed the union's Ford department, during which time the number two automaker announced its plans to eliminate 35,000 jobs, or 10 percent of the workforce, and shut down at least five plants.

His selection as head of the union at the UAW Constitutional Convention in Las Vegas last week was a foregone conclusion. Last fall Gettelfinger was handpicked by outgoing president Stephen Yokich and the 19-member Administrative Caucus that controls the union—without the slightest input from the majority of the union membership.

Gettelfinger entered onto the broader stage after an explosion at Ford's River Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan, which killed six autoworkers and severely injured 14 others. On the afternoon of February 1, 1999, gas inside one of the boilers at the power plant at the complex ignited, causing a massive explosion and fireball that ripped through the facility. Donald Harper, 58, who was working on the 60-foot tall boiler, was killed instantly. Over the next three weeks, five others workers—Warren Blow, 51; Ron Moritz, 44; Ken Anderson, 44; Cody Boatwright, 51; and John Arseneau, 45—died from devastating burns and other injuries.

Within hours of the explosion—the deadliest accident in the history of the US auto industry—Gettelfinger rushed to the defense of the company. Before any investigation had even

begun, he praised Ford, saying that the power station was among the best run plants in the Ford system. “It was a safe facility, there's no question about that,” he told the *Detroit News*. “That's why this is so perplexing to us.”

During a joint UAW-Ford press conference the day after the blast, Gettelfinger again displayed his contempt for the lives of the auto workers he ostensibly represents. In response to a question about whether Ford's cost-cutting and downsizing had resulted in an erosion of safety protections that might have contributed to the disaster, Gettelfinger declared, “I don't think there has been an erosion of safety.” He added, “We have productivity committees and health and safety committees and we work these things out internally. Ford has opened its door to us. When there is cost-cutting, Ford's concern has always been with the people impacted.”

In fact, the blast was the direct result of Ford's ongoing cost-cutting measures—including the elimination of 9,000 jobs and \$2.2 billion in spending the previous year alone—and its criminal negligence towards the safety of its employees. An investigation by the state's occupational safety and health administration concluded that Ford management had been well aware of the potential for disaster at the 78-year-old power plant, but made a calculated decision not to spend the money to replace antiquated and dangerous equipment.

The investigation also established the complicity of the UAW, which under the national UAW-Ford contract was jointly responsible for safety conditions. UAW officials ignored the safety grievances filed by powerhouse workers—including three of the six men killed in the explosion—complaining of dangerous equipment, including the very boiler that exploded.

Ronald Gettelfinger is a company man who epitomizes the UAW bureaucracy's longstanding policy of labor-management collaboration. The new president of the United Auto Workers union reportedly keeps a picture of the

company's chairman, William Clay Ford Jr., in his office.

Like many of those who make up the trade union bureaucracy, Gettelfinger is a definite social type: a middle class careerist who has nothing but contempt for those who work for a living in the auto plants. A recent biographical sketch in the *Detroit News* noted, "It was never Gettelfinger's intention to become an auto worker." After dropping out of Indiana University in 1964, he went to work at the Ford plant in Louisville. "If he couldn't avoid the shop floor," the *News* wrote, "he would use it to catapult himself to better things." While taking business courses at night, Gettelfinger got involved with "UAW local politics," according to the newspaper, and in 1978 became bargaining chairman at the plant, enabling him to get off the assembly line.

The workers at the Louisville plant had a reputation for militancy and resistance to speedup. Because of this, Ford decided to shut down the plant in 1979. Gettelfinger and Local 862 President Owen Hammons went to work to blackmail their members into accepting management's demands. Hammons, who is described as Gettelfinger's union "mentor," denounced the Louisville workers, writing, "No one wants to do more today than they did yesterday even if before, for four hours, they didn't do a thing. I mean, that's not what a union is about. It really isn't."

According to the *Detroit News* account, "Gettelfinger told workers point-blank that if they didn't start showing up and putting in a full day's work, the plant would close and they wouldn't have jobs. The message sank in, and the factory's absenteeism dropped" and "productivity and quality improved."

His role as a company stooge earned Gettelfinger the hatred of workers at the Louisville plant. At the same time, however, it gained him the attention of the talent scouts in the UAW hierarchy. "UAW leaders in Detroit took notice of his leadership and bargaining skills," the *News* writes. "They promoted him to the union's regional office, which oversaw Indiana and Kentucky. He was elected director of the region in 1992."

An ex-Marine and reportedly a deeply religious Catholic, Gettelfinger naturally shares all the backward views of the union bureaucracy: nationalism, anticommunism, devotion to the Democratic Party and hostility to the rank and file. As an example of this outlook, two months ago he authored a letter to be distributed to Ford workers demanding they only buy US-made Ford vehicles, instead of Volvos, Jaguars and other European brands owned by Ford.

Gettelfinger's rise to the top of the UAW bureaucracy coincides with the completion of the union's transformation into a direct tool of management. By the late 1970s, company men and careerists like Gettelfinger filled the

leadership positions of the union, which in many cases had been manned by socialist-minded workers and militants who had been purged by the Reuther brothers more than a generation earlier.

In 1979-80, the UAW imposed hundreds of millions of dollars in concessions on its members during the Chrysler bailout, in return for a seat on the company's board of directors. By 1983 the union officially adopted corporatism as its guiding principle. According to this outlook, the working class has no independent interests divergent or distinct from those of the capitalist owners. The UAW's primary role, accordingly, was to collaborate with management in boosting productivity and cutting labor costs in order to help US companies compete against Japanese and European auto companies.

What has this policy reaped? Since 1978 membership in the UAW has fallen from 1.5 million to around 700,000. During the same period, while top auto executives have seen their pay rise by 109 percent—not counting the millions more they have made in bonuses, stocks options and other compensation—autoworkers' real wages have grown by only 1.3 percent.

In return for its collaboration in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the suppression of struggles to improve living standards and working conditions, the UAW bureaucracy gained access to hundreds of millions of dollars in joint labor-management funds and other perks. Today the majority of autoworkers rightfully look upon the UAW as little more than a criminal operation.

While it has repeatedly failed to garner enough support to organize workers at European and Asian-owned factories in the US, the number of lawsuits by rank-and-file workers against corruption, nepotism and intimidation in the union has risen steadily. In the past, retiring UAW presidents were appointed to important posts in government and academia. The best that outgoing union president Stephen Yokich can hope for is keeping himself out of jail, given the number of allegations of possible criminal activity by the UAW bureaucracy.

The UAW continues to exist today only because of inertia and the goodwill of management. The elevation of the life-long bureaucrat and non-entity Ron Gettelfinger is a sure sign it's on its last legs.



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