

State takeover of Flint highlights social decay in birthplace of US auto union

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Flint, Michigan, the fourth largest city in the state with a population of 125,000, is in receivership. The municipal government in the former center of the General Motors auto empire has been plunged into bankruptcy as a result of successive plant closures, capped by the recent shutdown of the Buick City complex.

Tens of thousands of workers and their families have seen their community devastated and their lives ripped apart due to the vagaries of the market and the decisions of corporate executives. Conditions in the once booming industrial center are a testament to the chaos and irrationality of production for profit, and epitomize those in many other industrial centers throughout the US.

General Motors has cut its Flint workforce from 82,000 in 1970 to just 15,000 today. The final blow came in 1999 when GM closed its huge Buick City complex on the north side of town. Today cranes and bulldozers are clearing the site.

As recently as the mid-1980s, Buick City employed 28,000 workers. It was the last auto assembly plant in Flint, where car production began in 1904.

GM is also planning to close another plant in the city, the AC Delphi parts plant. It is the only plant still operating in Flint that was part of the 1937 sit-down strikes which established the United Auto Workers (UAW) as a mass organization and inspired the building of the CIO industrial unions in the US.

As the company dismantled operations in the city, municipal finances collapsed, forcing the elimination of vital services on which workers and their families depend.

In March, voters removed Mayor Woodrow Stanley, a Democratic politician in the midst of his third term. Stanley, elected with the support of the UAW, had presided over the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and the decimation of social services. He was the first mayor of a major US city to be recalled since the mayor of Omaha, Nebraska, 15 years ago. Stanley's administration had no solution to the mounting deficits facing the city, and a section of big business saw his removal as necessary for resolving Flint's financial crisis through even deeper attacks on the working class.

The defeat of Stanley reflected the alienation of voters in this overwhelmingly working class city from the Democratic Party. During the recall campaign, Stanley received the backing of

prominent Democrats, including former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, current Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, and former Democratic gubernatorial candidate Geoffrey Fieger. Former president Bill Clinton recorded a radio advertisement calling on Flint voters to defeat the recall drive.

In May of 2002, Republican Governor John Engler declared a financial state of emergency in Flint and began proceedings to implement a state takeover. Engler named Ed Kurtz, former president of a private business college, to oversee Flint's finances.

On August 20, the Michigan Court of Appeals overturned a lower court ruling that had temporarily halted a takeover by the state. A September 14 court ruling reaffirmed this decision, effectively ending attempts by the city council to block the takeover.

Since then Kurtz has proposed draconian budget cuts in an effort to erase a \$40 million deficit. The cuts come at a time when Flint's social services and infrastructure are already in a state of near-collapse. Among the proposals under consideration are layoffs of firefighters, the closure of community centers and cuts in trash collection.

While slashing city services, Kurtz recently authorized the purchase of 30 M-16 military assault rifles for Flint police.

The funding crisis is so severe that many basic services no longer exist. The city's housing department has been virtually dismantled. The city's ambulance service has been discontinued and the city even shut its jail.

Hundreds of vacant and derelict homes and businesses, which should have been condemned and demolished long ago, line Flint's streets. Over 12 percent of Flint homes are vacant, the highest vacancy rate in Michigan. The city's unemployment rate is 14.3 percent, compared to a statewide average of 5.9 percent. More than half of the city's children live in poverty.

The fate of Flint testifies to the failure of the United Auto Workers and the AFL-CIO trade union federation to defend the interests of the working class. The abandonment by the UAW of any defense of the jobs and living conditions of auto workers is the product of a protracted degeneration, which parallels the decay of official trade unions throughout the world.

The UAW was born as a mass industrial union in the sit-down strikes of 1937, which began in Flint. The formation of

the industrial unions was spurred by the economic catastrophe of the 1930s. Workers inspired by socialist ideals and convictions, and by the Russian Revolution of 1917, played a key role in the class battles that led to the establishment of mass industrial unions.

However, the movement that established the UAW and the other industrial unions never rose to the level of a political challenge to capitalism. The leadership of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the industrial union movement that broke with the craft union-dominated American Federation of Labor (AFL), refused to break politically with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, and limited its demands to what capitalism could be pressured to give.

On the international front, the CIO lined up behind the foreign policy of US imperialism. During World War II the UAW helped enforce the no-strike pledge and strangled work actions protesting rising prices and poor working conditions.

In the period following the war, the US ruling class was able to grant substantial improvements in wages and benefits to auto workers and other sections of the industrial working class. However, this was accompanied by a political assault on socialist-minded workers and intellectuals. The UAW joined the government-led witch-hunt of the late 1940s and early 1950s, purging the left-wing militants who had led the industrial struggles of the 1930s. In 1955 the AFL and the CIO merged, based on a program of anti-communism and support for US imperialism.

When the economic crisis of the mid- to late-1970s hit the auto industry, the UAW proved incapable, based on its pro-capitalist and nationalist policies, of opposing the shutdown of plants and the layoff of tens of thousands of workers. Instead the UAW moved toward ever closer collaboration with management.

The UAW embraced the program of economic nationalism and unrestrained class collaboration. Beginning with the Chrysler concessions in 1979, the UAW called on auto workers to sacrifice in the name of making American business competitive. It demanded that workers unite with the Ford, General Motors and Chrysler bosses and subordinate their own needs to the drive of the employers to cut costs and increase profits.

The UAW fomented anti-Mexican and anti-Japanese racism, telling US workers that their enemies were workers overseas. The UAW supported the establishment of a network of joint union-management committees, subsidized by the companies. The union leadership accompanied the creation of such corporatist structures with an all-out assault on the traditions of militant struggle and working class solidarity that had animated the generation of workers who built the union.

In return for the patronage of the auto companies, the UAW bureaucracy offered its services as an unofficial arm of management on the shop floor. It openly assisted the auto bosses in carrying out huge increases in productivity. The

UAW continued to insist that workers vote for the big business politicians of the Democratic Party, even though their policies were increasingly indistinguishable from those of the Republicans.

The results of this policy were predictable. With the collaboration of the UAW leadership, the auto companies eliminated hundreds of thousands of jobs in Flint and other major cities. Workers' lives were devastated, small businesses were driven into bankruptcy, and entire neighborhoods were transformed into impoverished ghettos. Under the Democratic Clinton administration, the jobs of auto workers continued to be slashed and the gap between rich and poor increased to unprecedented levels.

In 1998, when GM workers struck two parts plants in Flint, crippling GM production, the UAW bureaucracy refused to make the threatened closure of Buick City an issue. After 44 days the union brought the strike to an end, agreeing to a settlement that preserved the company's right to continue slashing jobs.

These experiences point to the inability of the UAW, based on its alliance with the Democratic Party and its program of economic nationalism and defense of the profit system, to defend even the most elementary interests of the working class. The working class requires an independent political strategy, grounded on the international unity of the working class in the struggle for socialism.

Production must be placed under the planned and democratic control of the working class and organized on the basis of human need, not profit. The resources must be made available to build affordable housing and provide quality education and decent health care. This is the fight carried forward by the Socialist Equality Party.



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