

An exchange with an Ohio auto worker

19 July 2005

Below we post a letter from an auto worker in Ohio on the experiences of workers in his plant after they voted to affiliate with the United Auto Workers union (UAW). It is followed by reply by Jerry White for the WSWs editorial board.

Subject: Hung out to dry

To: Anyone that can help

We voted the UAW in, in Nov. 2003. By voting the union in, we agreed to accept a pre-written contract sight unseen. Sound stupid? It does now, but the fact that it passed by 98 percent tells you how bad things were. You can imagine how lame and how management-favored this contract is.

We have severely struggled, with virtually no help from the [UAW] International. We have had one steward training session. Our regional rep seldom returns our calls, but he converses frequently with the company's Human Resources man.

We have had 5 step 4 grievances that he has settled (thrown out), and the company is rolling over the top of us. I am the vice president and quite outspoken, and am omitted from procedures even in the absence of the president....

Talk is leaning toward denouncing the UAW due to the lack of help. What would happen to us then? Me, I would be fired immediately. The urge to quit looms overhead daily. My workload continues to grow, and I am starting to wonder why I am subjecting myself to this.

Members are against members, favoritism is blatant, and they expect us to work some kind of miracle. We have had OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) in four times. Nothing changes. We have lodged two charges through the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), and the company prevails. Our insurance company charges \$102.88 for a prescription that costs \$15.39 if you pay cash.

WHERE CAN WE GO FOR HELP?

LS

Dear LS,

Thank you for the letter detailing conditions at your plant after workers voted to join the United Auto Workers. Your experience is all too common: workers join a union to strengthen their position against management, but find themselves confronting a struggle not only against the company, but also against the union they elected to represent them.

Far from boosting solidarity and raising the capacity of workers for self-sacrifice and common struggle, UAW officials encourage dog-eat-dog competition, obsequiousness toward the corporations and narrow and selfish opportunism. The disunity you describe among your fellow workers is typical of the unhealthy atmosphere created by the UAW and the maneuvers it conducts behind the backs of the rank-and-file.

The sweetheart contract signed by the UAW at your plant is also commonplace. This is particularly prevalent in the auto parts industry, where the UAW has colluded with the Big Three automakers to keep costs down at its supplier plants.

In several cases, GM, Ford and DaimlerChrysler have pressured their suppliers to sign UAW contracts as part of a quid pro quo between the auto bosses and the UAW. In exchange for the UAW bureaucracy's assistance in the downsizing of the Big Three auto companies, including the spinning off of GM's and Ford's parts divisions, the Detroit automakers have rewarded the UAW bureaucracy with a new source of dues income, to offset the loss of hundreds of thousands of UAW members at the Big Three plants. The UAW has reciprocated by signing agreements at the parts facilities that enshrine low wages and poor working conditions.

The indifference of UAW officials towards the conditions of the workers they nominally represent underscores the fact that the UAW is not a genuine workers' organization. It is an organization controlled by a privileged bureaucracy, whose income and perks depend, in the final analysis, on how well the union leadership keeps the workers in line and helps management reduce costs and boost profits.

There is a vast gap between the income and upper-middle-class lifestyle of top UAW officials and ordinary workers. The UAW hierarchy controls over \$1 billion in assets, and some of its pension fund is invested in GMAC, Ford Motor Credit Corp. and Chrysler Finance Corp., according to critics within the union.

These same critics have charged that a third of the International reps receive salaries, allowances and expenses from the Big Three that are filtered through such joint funds as GM/Delphi's Center for Human Resources [CHR]. This is only one of dozens of training programs, investment funds and real estate ventures the UAW operates with the Big Three. The antagonism between the UAW bureaucracy and the rank-and-file is demonstrated by the growing number of lawsuits filed by members against the UAW for nepotism and other forms of corruption.

Your situation highlights the tragedy of the American labor movement and the dilemma facing the working class today. The UAW and other mass industrial unions that were established through the heroic struggles and sacrifice of generations of workers in the past resemble today the company unions workers bitterly fought in the 1930s.

The hostility you express toward the UAW bureaucracy is well placed. Any serious struggle by workers at your plant would place you in an immediate confrontation with the UAW International and its regional and local representatives. There are numerous examples of how the union bureaucracy collaborated with management to threaten and victimize militant workers.

In 1979-1980, UAW President Douglas Fraser was brought onto the Chrysler board of directors to help impose wage and benefits cuts and help management target plants with militant workforces for closure. In the 1980s and 1990s, the UAW isolated and betrayed numerous strikes, from Caterpillar, to GM Flint, to Accuride in Kentucky. What has been the result? With continued downsizing by the automakers—including GM's recent announcement that it will cut 25,000 jobs—UAW membership is expected to fall below 600,000 for the first time since 1942, from a peak of 1.5 million in 1979.

In considering what road workers must take to develop organizations that will fight to defend their interests, it is first necessary to ask why the trade unions have so ignominiously collapsed. It is not enough to point to the personal cowardice and corruption of the UAW leadership. The degeneration of the unions in the US—and, for that matter, internationally—has profound historical and objective causes that go beyond the subjective traits of union officials.

In large measure, those who led the militant struggles of the 1930s, including the sit-down strikes at GM's plants in Flint that established the UAW as a mass industrial union, were socialists and militants who were influenced by socialists. Many of the most steadfast fighters who pioneered the founding of the UAW saw the industrial organization of the working class as a first step in the political organization of workers.

The Trotskyist movement in the US called for the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to break from Roosevelt and the Democratic Party and establish a labor party based on a socialist program. It insisted that the upsurge of the working class would either take an independent political form, or it would be driven back and demoralized.

Tragically, the American labor movement followed the latter path, with the CIO leaders maintaining their alliance with the Democratic Party and opposing the building of a labor party. In the aftermath of World War II, union leaders like UAW President Walter Reuther led a witch-hunting campaign against socialists in the unions and consolidated their control based on anti-communism, support for the Cold War foreign policy of the US government, and subordination of the working class to the political parties of big business. (For an historical account of this process, see: "The split in the AFL-CIO".)

Although workers saw their living standards rise during the post-war period of economic expansion and relative class compromise, these gains were achieved at the expense of the political consciousness and organization of the working class. As a result, the working class was unprepared for the crisis of American and world capitalism that erupted in the 1970s, when Corporate America, reacting to the declining rate of profit and increased international competition, began shifting production to low-wage regions and launched a full-scale assault on the jobs and living standards of the American working class, beginning with Reagan's firing in 1981 of the PATCO air traffic controllers.

The process of capitalist globalization fatally undermined the unions, which were rooted in the national labor market. From organizations that pressured the employers, the unions were transformed into organizations that pressured workers for

concessions in order to attract investment. This opened the way for the integration of the unions into the structure of corporate management that took place in the 1980s and 1990s.

The building of new organizations to defend workers is an urgent necessity. If workers are not going to be betrayed again, however, they must make a serious examination of the historical experiences of the working class, not only in the US but internationally, and build a movement based on a new political perspective of internationalism and the fight for social equality.

In the first place, the working class must make a decisive break with the Democratic Party. The great tragedy of the labor movement has been its failure to free itself from the political dominance of this capitalist party—the political graveyard of all the aspirations and struggles of the working class.

What is required, however, is not simply an organizational break from the Democrats and the setting up of some third capitalist party. A new political party must be based on program that defends the independent interests of the working class—i.e., a socialist program.

No issue confronting the working class—whether it is the need for decent wages and health care, or how to oppose the threat of militarism and dictatorship—can be resolved without breaking the monopoly the financial elite exercises over economic and political life. Genuine democratic control must be extended over basic industry and the most important sectors of the economy in order to use the wealth created by the working class to meet the needs of society as a whole.

The UAW and the AFL-CIO will never carry out such a fight. They can no more be transformed into genuine working class organizations than a tiger can change its stripes.

You concluded your letter by asking where to go for help. The Socialist Equality Party has a long record of struggle for the political independence of the working class, internationalism and socialism. We urge you to study our history and program and consider seriously joining the fight to build our party as the mass political movement of the working class.

Jerry White for the WSWs



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact