

Politics, socialism and the struggle of Delphi workers

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The drive by Delphi Corporation, the largest US auto parts maker, to impose a 60 percent wage cut on its 33,000 unionized workers and gut pensions, health benefits and working conditions has brought into sharp focus the collapse of the American labor movement.

The prospect of a return to conditions of poverty and unbridled exploitation not seen since the open shop days of the 1930s is the outcome of a protracted process of bureaucratization, betrayal and ever more open union-management collaboration which has been ongoing for more than half a century. The present debacle is, in the final analysis, the product of the trade union bureaucracy's post-war purge of socialists and its subsequent efforts to keep all anti-capitalist politics out of the unions.

The United Auto Workers, which spearheaded the struggle to establish industrial unions in the US, largely due to the efforts of socialists and left-wing militants, also spearheaded the Cold War witch-hunt that brought the CIO unions firmly under the control of an opportunist bureaucracy, subservient to the interests of American capitalism.

Today, as the consequences of that historic betrayal confront workers at Delphi—soon to be followed by workers throughout the auto industry and beyond—there is a new attempt to bar any discussion of a socialist alternative to the nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective that has led the working class into a blind alley.

At the forefront of this effort is an entire layer of professional dissidents in the UAW who have made a career of using occasional left phrases to carve out a niche for themselves in and around the bureaucracy.

A group of such dissidents has called "Rank-and-File Delphi" meetings in Michigan and Indiana. The first is to be held November 7 in Comstock, Michigan, the site of a Delphi plant slated for closure.

The meeting is being organized by Gregg Shotwell, an

executive board member of UAW Local 2151 at the Delphi plant in Cooperstown. Shotwell, who is associated with the New Directions group in the UAW, writes an online newsletter called *Live Bait & Ammo*. His commentaries are regularly published by *Labor Notes* and the International Socialist Organization (ISO).

According to a notice posed on the Internet, the meeting was called to "exchange ideas and formulate a strategy of action to defend our interests." The notice assures workers that the meeting "will not be commandeered by an International appointee or local union official."

The notice concludes with a proviso that only UAW members will be allowed at the meeting and that reporters will be prohibited.

The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Shotwell to challenge this restriction and request that we be allowed to participate in the meeting. This writer spoke to Shotwell by telephone on November 1.

He first claimed that workers would not feel free to talk about possible industrial action if reporters were present. That this was a mere pretext became clear when Shotwell added, "There isn't going to be any discussion of politics at this meeting, just specific tactical measures."

He continued: "This is an emergency. We don't have time for a broad, historical and philosophical conference. Education about socialism and the UAW is not relevant to this meeting." He added, "We don't want our meeting disrupted by that type of discussion. We're in a disaster."

Shotwell could not have summed up better the backward and futile approach to attacks by the government and the corporations that has led to the disaster which he bemoans. It is an old refrain: "Things are serious. Things are urgent. There is no time to think. No time to examine the past. No time for politics."

Of course, the avoidance of politics is itself politics. It is the politics of the status quo—acceptance of the profit system and support for the Democratic Party.

On the basis of this approach, what does Shotwell propose? In an October 15 article on his web site, he opposes strike action and instead urges a “work-to-rule” slowdown inside certain Delphi plants.

It is truly pathetic to suggest that such half-measures are sufficient to push back the largest auto parts manufacturer in the world, which has on its side the US Bankruptcy Court and the Bush administration. Especially at a plant that is already slated for closure, and under conditions where Delphi CEO Steve Miller has threatened to close down any plant where industrial action takes place.

All that Shotwell evidently has to show for his supposed hard-nosed practicality is a plan that is eminently impractical and hopelessly inadequate. He doesn't want to discuss politics. But there are very definite political conceptions that underlie his tactics.

One of the most important is the notion that the UAW remains a workers' organization, which can be made to fight if only there is sufficient pressure from below. Shotwell spells this out in the above-mentioned article, where he states: “The only thing that can move an inert object (UAW International) is an unstoppable force (rank and file militancy).”

This is an illusion—and a highly debilitating one. The myth that today's UAW is a workers' organization flies in the face of a quarter century of betrayals, from the Chrysler bailout, to the sellout of the Caterpillar strike, to the recent approval of GM's slashing of retiree benefits. The UAW has become an organization not of the workers, but of a labor bureaucracy. It defends the interests of a privileged and corrupt middle-class layer that functions entirely outside the control of the workers.

UAW workers have had a long and bitter experience with those who claimed they could reform the UAW, including the New Directions faction that emerged in the late 1980s. New Directions leaders such as Flint UAW Local 599 President David Yettaw—whom Shotwell calls his mentor—collaborated down the line with the auto companies in slashing jobs, imposing speedup and gutting working conditions. Yettaw's factory complex, Buick City, which once employed 20,000 workers, has been largely reduced to rubble.

A precondition for any serious fight is an understanding that the UAW cannot be revived. It is a bureaucratic shell hostile to the working class. A serious fight against wage-cutting, plant closures and downsizing requires a rebellion against the UAW. Workers need to build new, genuinely democratic organizations of struggle, to carry out strike action and rally the working class as a whole.

A second and related conception is that the working class can defend itself without breaking with the Democratic Party and building an independent political movement to fight for its interests in opposition to the profit system.

But how can workers fight a massive company like Delphi if they don't challenge the economic and political set-up in America that defends the “right” of corporate bosses like Miller to shut factories and slash wages?

This brings us to the central question—which the New Directions opportunists and outfits like *Labor Notes* and the ISO seek so diligently to obscure: the revival of the workers' movement must take a political form. To answer the offensive of globalized capital, the relentless drive of the bosses to shift production to low-wage regions and destroy the past gains of the working class, workers must build their own mass party, fighting to unite American workers with their class brothers around the world for the reorganization of economic life on the basis of human need, not the ever more obscene accumulation of private wealth.

If the multi-millionaire CEOs, who have bled their firms in order to fill their own pockets, and the vulture speculators and asset-strippers move to close plants and destroy the livelihoods of tens of thousands of working people, their companies should be transformed into publicly owned and democratically controlled enterprises.

That is the perspective for which the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have consistently fought. It needs to be discussed and considered by Delphi workers, and every other section of the working class.



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