

US auto workers union launches sham “war” against Delphi

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10 November 2005

In the face of growing anger by rank-and-file workers against Delphi Corporation and their own union, the United Auto Workers, the UAW bureaucracy has called for a work-to-rule slowdown at the giant auto supply company. Delphi, which declared bankruptcy last month, is attempting to impose a 60 percent wage cut and gut the benefits and working conditions of its 33,000 unionized workers.

On Monday, November 7, a union spokesman confirmed that UAW International President Ronald Gettelfinger had endorsed the work-to-rule tactic, which calls for workers to do no more than their assigned duties as spelled out in the union contract.

Since a local union leaked the company’s demands that workers accept a poverty wage of \$9.00 an hour and other sweeping concessions, the UAW bureaucracy has remained virtually silent, aside from a perfunctory statement of protest. This has provoked widespread denunciations of the UAW by workers, growing sentiment for a strike and a slowdown by workers at the Lockport, New York plant, one of Delphi’s largest facilities.

The call for the limited work action followed a statement by the UAW and five other unions representing Delphi workers that they had formed a coalition called Mobilizing@Delphi to defend the Delphi workers. The coalition plans to launch a campaign, modeled after the “corporate campaign” public relations events the AFL-CIO often uses in conjunction with its isolation and betrayal of workers’ struggles. The campaign will appeal to Delphi’s corporate customers, investors and Democratic Party politicians to pressure the company to negotiate with the unions, rather than impose a contract through the bankruptcy courts.

News coverage of the new coalition and Gettelfinger’s endorsement of the work-to-rule presented the actions as a major counteroffensive, with the *Detroit Free Press*

headlining their article, “Unions declare war on Delphi.”

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The suggestion that one of the world’s largest auto supply companies—backed to the hilt by Wall Street, the US Bankruptcy Court and the Bush administration—can be confronted with limited shop floor tactics and publicity stunts is absurd and an insult to the intelligence of Delphi workers.

Moreover, such ineffectual tactics as the work-to-rule have often played into the hands of management, which has used them to victimize militant workers. After its cowardly surrender to Caterpillar during the 1992 strike, the UAW ordered its 12,000 striking workers back into the plants and initiated an “in-plant” strategy of slowdowns. The only result was the firing of scores of militant workers. The threat against Delphi workers is all the more real since Delphi CEO Robert “Steve” Miller has already promised to shut down any plant where workers take industrial action.

Any serious struggle would require, at a minimum, launching a strike by Delphi’s 33,000 workers to shut down all of the company’s plants and the extension of the strike to workers at the Big Three auto corporations that are backing Delphi’s attack on autoworkers’ living standards and working conditions. Such action would raise the need for a political struggle against the bankruptcy court and the two big-business parties and pose the question of the nationalization of the auto industry.

The UAW bureaucracy is opposed to such a struggle. For the last three decades the union bureaucracy has collaborated with the Big Three automakers in destroying the jobs and living standards of autoworkers in order to boost the competitiveness and profitability of the US car companies. This has found its clearest expression in the auto parts industry, where the UAW betrayed a series of strikes in the 1980s and allowed sharp reductions in

wages, to the point where workers in the auto parts industry earned 30 percent less than their counterparts in the Big Three assembly plants. The union then gave the green light to the spin-off of the GM and Ford parts divisions in 1999 and 2000, paving the way for the drastic reduction in labor costs now being demanded by Delphi.

Far from being opposed to slashing the wages and living standards of Delphi workers, the UAW bureaucracy supports it as a means of lowering costs for GM and making it more competitive against European and Asian carmakers.

There are two main problems for the UAW, however. First, Delphi's CEO has moved aggressively to destroy not only the living standards and working conditions of UAW members, but the corporatist labor-management structure that provides posts and privileges to the UAW bureaucracy. Included in Delphi's demands is a reduction in the number of elected union officials at each plant, even if that means the elimination of UAW officials who are jointly appointed to oversee various labor-management schemes, such as quality and safety teams, worker retraining and employee-assistance programs.

The danger for the bureaucracy is that Delphi management and the bankruptcy court will circumvent the union and wipe out these structures. Thus, in the joint statement by Mobilizing@Delphi, the union leaders plead with Delphi management and express their readiness to impose huge concessions on their membership, if only given a chance to collaborate with management. "Our unions have demonstrated time and again our willingness and ability to develop innovative, effective and fair approaches to solving problems," the coalition declares.

The second problem for the UAW bureaucracy is that outside of the court imposing the concessions on the backs of Delphi workers it would be impossible for the union to bring the company's present demands back to the membership, without, as one auto industry analyst recently suggested, the union leadership being "lynched."

The call for a work-to-rule is a cynical maneuver that the UAW hopes will give it some leverage to work out a deal with Delphi to preserve the labor-management structures and modify some of the company's most egregious demands so the labor bureaucracy can sell an agreement to its members. At the same time, the UAW and other unions are trying to gain some credibility among their members.

The UAW's announcement sheds further light on the series of "Rank-and-File Delphi" meetings called by professional union dissidents and their "left" supporters

from Labor Notes and other middle-class radical groups. The first such meeting, called by Gregg Shotwell, a UAW Local 2151 executive board member at Delphi and supporter of the New Directions faction of the UAW bureaucracy, was held Sunday, November 6, in Comstock Park, Michigan.

The event was attended by nearly 200 workers, including Delphi, GM and Ford workers, from Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and New York. Shotwell and his supporters opposed any discussion of an independent and socialist political strategy by attempting to exclude the *World Socialist Web Site* from the meeting. This effort failed, however, when workers overwhelming voted to allow WSWS reporters to participate in the meeting.

Throughout the meeting, however, Shotwell and his supporters sought to channel the anger of Delphi workers into forms acceptable to the UAW bureaucracy. They repeatedly promoted a work-to-rule slowdown as the be-all and end-all of the class struggle, going so far as calling upon former UAW officials from the defeated Caterpillar strike to discuss the "success" of this tactic.

The false perspective advanced by the UAW dissidents was that union officials would be forced to "catch up to the membership" and wage a serious struggle if workers launched a slowdown. Far from representing the aspirations of rank-and-file workers who have all but abandoned any belief that the UAW represents them, Shotwell and the others speak for a faction of the UAW bureaucracy that wants to promote illusions in the viability of the union. Now the UAW International has adopted the dissidents' call for a "work-to-rule" as a diversionary tactic to conceal the betrayal it is preparing for the Delphi workers.



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