

Political issues facing US auto workers discussed at Kokomo meeting

A WSWS reporting team
17 November 2005

Representatives of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party participated in a meeting of auto workers in Kokomo, Indiana on November 15. The meeting was called to oppose the drastic job- and wage-cutting demands of US auto parts manufacturer Delphi Corporation. It was attended by some two hundred workers, including Delphi, General Motors and other auto workers from Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin.

Kokomo is the center of Delphi's Electronics & Safety division, which employs 5,000 workers, including 2,300 hourly employees. According to a confidential plan recently leaked to the *Detroit News*, Plant 9 of the company's Kokomo operations is on a list of facilities to be closed by 2010.

Delphi, which is demanding that the wages of its 33,000 unionized employees be cut from \$27 to \$10 an hour, along with the gutting of retirement and health benefits, is spearheading a drive by the US auto industry to impose an unprecedented rollback in the living standards of American auto workers.

General Motors, the world's largest automaker, recently slashed billions of dollars in medical benefits for its active and retired workers, and is expected to announce a restructuring plan next month that will include the shutdown of several plants and the elimination of 25,000 jobs. Many industry analysts are predicting that GM will follow Delphi into bankruptcy court.

The number two US auto company, Ford, is expected to reveal similar restructuring plans by the end of the year.

In the face of these attacks, the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy has continued its long-standing policy of collaborating with the auto bosses to cut labor costs and boost profits, going so far as to take legal action to prevent GM retirees from using the courts to oppose the slashing of their medical benefits.

The Kokomo meeting, which followed a similar meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan the week before, was presided over by Gregg Shotwell, an executive board member of UAW Local 2151 at the Delphi plant in Cooperstown, Michigan. Shotwell is a supporter of the New Directions caucus of the UAW.

Rank-and-file workers in attendance expressed anger at the betrayal of the UAW bureaucracy and were receptive to a discussion on a new political strategy to defend the working class.

Shotwell attempted to limit the discussion to proposals for various shop floor tactics, such as a work-to-rule slowdown, which was recently endorsed by UAW International President Ron Gettelfinger (See "US auto union launches sham 'war' against

Delphi").

Although he acknowledged the widespread hostility to the UAW bureaucracy, Shotwell said the meeting had not been called to discuss building an alternative to the UAW or organizing a political struggle independently of the union. "We're here to talk about resisting concessions at Delphi, not other political causes," he said. "We have to focus on industrial action. We can't be distracted with a political discussion, where we can spend hours talking and not resolve anything."

It soon became clear that this attempt to curtail political discussion was bound up with a perspective that promotes illusions in the UAW and opposes a break with the Democratic Party.

Following Shotwell, Warren Davis, a former Cleveland-area regional director of the UAW and longtime member of the union's International Executive Board, acknowledged that the UAW had largely been bought off by management and that US unions were exporting the "worst jointness" outlook throughout the world, resulting in the erosion of wages for workers internationally.

Nevertheless, he suggested that workers take up Gettelfinger's call for a work-to-rule slowdown and prepare for a strike, on the grounds that this would give the union bargaining committee "leverage" in its negotiations with Delphi. Davis put forward this conception of rank-and-file pressure on the union leadership, even though he acknowledged that the UAW officialdom had been "co-opted" and would only "sell out" the workers.

This false perspective was challenged from the floor by Jim Lawrence, the Socialist Equality Party's 2004 vice presidential candidate and a retired worker and UAW member at GM's brake plant in Dayton, Ohio. (Lawrence's plant became part of Delphi, which was spun off by GM in 1999).

"You don't want to have politics at this meeting," Lawrence said, "but that's politics itself." While industrial action was necessary, he said, "workers face a new world reality." He pointed to the spread of transnational corporations that scour the globe for cheap labor. "We struck in Dayton in 1996, and now there is nothing but a concrete slab where the plant used to be."

"This is not a trade union struggle," Lawrence insisted, "but a political struggle." He continued, "Ninety percent of the working class is not in unions. We have to unite the entire working class for a struggle against the profit system."

Lawrence concluded with a call for a break with the UAW and the formation of an independent international political movement of the working class. "Delphi and GM have two political parties

on their side,” Lawrence said, “and we don’t even have one.”

Lawrence received warm applause from the workers present, and the character of the discussion began to change, with workers beginning to question the limitations of Shotwell’s proposals and searching for other means to fight Delphi, the bankruptcy court and the Bush administration.

Jerry Isaacs, a reporter for the WSWs, took the podium. “You cannot fight twenty-first century transnational corporations with nineteenth century shop floor tactics,” he said. He argued that the workers were more than capable of performing courageously in industrial action, but that political understanding and direction were the most critical requirements. He urged workers to consider the long record of strikes betrayed by the UAW and the AFL-CIO, from the PATCO air traffic controllers to the Caterpillar strikes and the recent betrayal of airline mechanics at Northwest Airlines. He said the unions were no longer workers’ organizations, but organizations of a labor bureaucracy, which was hostile to the working class.

Isaacs insisted that a political struggle that challenged the entire existing economic and political setup was necessary. The profit system, he said, was benefiting only the top 1 percent, “the wealthy investors and corporate CEOs like Delphi’s Steve Miller.”

Such a struggle, he continued, had to be based on a fight for socialism. He explained that the UAW bureaucracy had long used anticommunism to drive out its opponents, including the socialist and left-wing pioneers who had built the UAW in the 1930s. He said the working class had to take the auto industry and the whole economy out of the hands of the capitalist class and put it under the democratic control of the working class.

“We have to break free of the straightjacket of these old, bureaucratized unions and break with the Democratic Party, which serves the interests of big business,” he said. Delphi workers, he added, had to link their struggle to those of young people facing a future of low-wage jobs and the prospect of being sent to fight wars on behalf of the oil companies.

These remarks were greeted with applause, and were followed by more probing questions and discussion from the floor. Scott, a young worker with seven years at the Delphi Kokomo complex, took the podium and confronted Shotwell. “In 60 days we are going to lose everything when the court imposes the pay cut,” he said. “How are we going to fight the tank of Delphi with the pea-shooter of a work-to-rule?”

Throughout the meeting, several supporters of “left” tendencies such as Labor Notes and the International Socialist Organization (ISO) did their best to reinforce illusions in trade union reformism and the UAW bureaucracy. In a revealing comment, one member of the ISO said, “I’m all for socialism and revolution, but the UAW isn’t ready for that”—implying that an organization that has for decades dedicated itself to the defense of the profit system and pursued a policy of class collaboration could somehow be transformed into an instrument of revolutionary struggle!

Although there remained considerable confusion among workers, including suggestions that appeals to the bankruptcy judge and the Bush administration might improve matters, the intervention of the WSWs and SEP encouraged a serious discussion and began to raise the political questions confronting auto workers.

After the meeting, workers showed a keen interest in discussing socialism and the history of the SEP and its struggle against the UAW bureaucracy. Several bought literature and spoke with WSWs reporters.

Chris, a reader of the WSWs who has spent 12 years working at the Chrysler plant in Kokomo, expressed anger over the wage-cutting and benefit-slashing at Delphi. “It’s profit, greed, and the capitalist system—it’s the class struggle,” he said. “It’s the capitalists stuffing their pockets at the workers’ expense.

“I have reservations about the work-to-rule strategy because I believe the corporations can and will have ways to beat it. I have said it before and I will say it again—this is much more than a union issue, this is a community issue, this is a working class issue. There are millions of nonunion workers, working at Wal-Mart and elsewhere. Now more than ever union and nonunion workers must embrace each other. Minimum wage worker: your voice will no longer fall upon deaf ears. It is important that the whole working class stand together. Only together can we defeat this capitalist greed.”

Scott, the young worker who had challenged Shotwell at the meeting, said he was familiar with the WSWs. He said, “Somebody has to stand up” to the union. “There’s no reforming it.” Asked about the attempt to exclude political discussion from the meeting, Scott told the WSWs, “It’s about the politics as much as it is about the UAW.”

Dick, who retired after 30 years at GM, told the WSWs, “You made more sense than any other speakers.” Asked what he thought of the UAW bureaucracy, he said, “They are parasites.”



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