

US auto union leader Douglas Fraser dead at 91

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Douglas Fraser, the president of the United Auto Workers union between 1977 and 1983, died Saturday at the age of 91 in Southfield, Michigan.

Fraser is best known for working with the auto industry and the government to impose unprecedented wage and benefit concessions on UAW members during the 1979-80 bailout of Chrysler Corporation. The UAW's acceptance of concessions and mass layoffs at Chrysler was a milestone in the embrace of corporatist labor-management collaboration by the UAW and the transformation of the American unions into appendages of the employers.

A stream of tributes from corporate heads, politicians and news commentators followed Fraser's death. The *Detroit News* praised him as the "epitome of the labor statesman." Ford Executive Chairman Bill Ford Jr. called him "one of America's great labor leaders," adding that the company owed the former UAW president "a debt of gratitude for the courage he showed" in negotiating labor agreements in the 1980s "that helped preserve the US auto industry during tough economic times."

Fraser was the last UAW president who had any personal connection to the mass working class struggles of the 1930s that established the auto union and industrial unions in other sections of US industry, although he did not play a major role in the explosive battles that forged the UAW.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1916, Fraser moved with his family to Detroit as a young child and went to work as a metal finisher at Chrysler's DeSoto plant in 1934. In March of 1937—a month after the end of the successful General Motors sit-down strike in Flint, the first major breakthrough for the newly formed UAW—Fraser was among the 60,000 Chrysler workers involved in the sit-down strike that shut Chrysler's six Detroit plants.

The leaders of these struggles were rank-and-file militants, many of whom were inspired by the ideals of socialism. Unlike the future UAW president Walter Reuther—who was a member of the Socialist Party and worked closely with the Communist Party during this period—or Fraser's predecessor as UAW president, Leonard Woodcock, also a member of the Socialist Party, there is no indication Fraser was politically involved.

The degeneration of the Communist Party and its slavish adherence to the foreign policy needs of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow facilitated the rise to leadership in the newly formed UAW and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) of the most conservative and opportunist elements within these organizations.

The betrayals of the CP—from its Popular Front alliance with Roosevelt and opposition to the building a labor party, to its no-strike pledge and opposition to working class resistance during World War II—enabled Reuther, who would take control of the union in 1946, to subsequently carry out a purge of left-wing elements in the UAW.

On this basis a leadership was consolidated in the UAW that explicitly defended the capitalist system and excluded any far-reaching demands that challenged the property rights and decision-making monopoly of the capitalist owners.

After serving three terms as president of UAW Local 227 in Detroit, Fraser was brought onto the staff of the International Union in 1947. This was in the midst of the anti-communist purge of the union apparatus.

After the 104-day strike at Chrysler in 1950, Reuther appointed Fraser, then a negotiator, to be his administrative assistant. This was followed by Fraser's appointment to head the union's Chrysler Department in 1962, and his election as UAW vice president in 1970, the same year Reuther died in an airplane crash. In the race to succeed Reuther, Fraser narrowly lost out to Leonard Woodcock, who would run the UAW from 1970 to 1977.

The UAW had struck a devil's bargain with the auto monopolies: In exchange for abandoning any demands for sweeping government-run social welfare programs, and for guaranteeing labor discipline and accepting the basic prerogatives of corporate management, the Big Three auto companies—General Motors, Ford and Chrysler—would provide autoworkers with regular wage increases, long-term employment and other benefits.

For more than two decades—under conditions of the post-World War II economic boom and the overwhelming preponderance of American industry on world markets—the consequences of this political betrayal were largely concealed. (In 1955, the US auto industry was producing four out of five of the world's automobiles). Between 1947 and 1973, the real income of US auto workers more than doubled.

But Reuther and others had bet the future of the working class on the dubious hope that US capitalism and the US-based auto companies would dominate the world market forever. By the mid-1970s, US corporations found themselves increasingly under pressure from European and Asian competitors in the world market and even within the US itself.

The oil embargo and gasoline price shock that followed the 1973 Arab-Israeli war led to a fall in the sales of Detroit's oversized

vehicles, and smaller imports from Germany and Japan took over 25 percent of the domestic market. Plant closings led to the layoff of 100,000 auto workers—the worst unemployment situation in the industry since the Great Depression.

The recession of 1974-75 revealed not only the crisis of the auto industry, but a dramatic decline in the international position of US capitalism as a whole. By the late 1970s, America's ruling elite had concluded that it could reverse its decline only by eliminating large sections of unprofitable industry, wiping out millions of jobs and drastically increasing the exploitation of American workers.

This meant jettisoning its policy of relative class compromise and directly confronting the working class, which, since the formation of the mass industrial unions in the 1930s, had consistently fought with great militancy to defend its jobs, living standards and other social gains.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, young auto workers defended themselves in a series of strikes—including unauthorized wildcat walkouts in Lordstown, Ohio, Detroit and other cities—against speedup and other brutal working conditions. Detroit Chrysler workers—more than a third whom were African-American—would be described in a later government study on the company as “one of the most troublesome workforces available.”

In 1973, Fraser led 1,000 union officials armed with baseball bats and pipes to break up a wildcat strike at Detroit's Mack Avenue Stamping plant organized by the black nationalist Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM).

Given its support for the capitalist system and its nationalist orientation, the UAW bureaucracy responded to the crisis of the US auto industry by offering its assistance to the auto bosses in cutting labor costs and suppressing rank-and-file resistance to plant closings and mass layoffs. Elected UAW international president in 1977, Fraser set out to discipline UAW members and undermine their militancy.

His first test was Chrysler Corporation, the weakest of the Big Three automakers, which by 1979 was losing \$6-8 million a day and heading toward bankruptcy. Fraser collaborated with the Carter administration and the Democratic Congress to engineer a federal bailout that was contingent on imposing massive concessions on his members.

In October 1979, Fraser ended the UAW's four-decade-long tradition of industry-wide contracts and signed a separate agreement with Chrysler—the first of many concessionary deals to come—giving up more than \$200 million in wages and benefits. Fraser would come back two more times and, using the threat of further plant closings, worked to impose \$3 an hour in wage cuts and other additional concessions.

In return for the concessions, Chrysler Chairman Lee Iacocca made the unprecedented move of appointing the UAW president to the company's board of directors—the first time in US history that a top union official was put on the board of a major corporation. In his capacity as a Chrysler director, Fraser collaborated with boss Lee Iacocca in targeting the most militant plants for closure.

The effort to “save” Chrysler was not about protecting the jobs and living standards of Chrysler workers. Rather, the federal bailout was aimed at paying off the banks and other creditors with money extorted from UAW members, while shutting down or

selling off large sections of the company. Chrysler eliminated 57,000 jobs and closed nearly 30 factories, including more than a dozen in Detroit.

By 1982, the UAW handed over to Chrysler a total of \$1.1 billion in concessions—nearly \$10,000 per worker. Givebacks were subsequently granted to Ford and GM, also in the name of keeping them “competitive” and “saving American jobs.” Fraser later boasted that UAW-backed concessions allowed the Big Three automakers to lower their break-even point from 7 million to 4 million cars a year.

During this period, the UAW joined Iacocca and the other auto bosses in promoting national chauvinism—blaming Japanese and German workers for “stealing American jobs.” According to Fraser and other union bureaucrats, any form of independent struggle by workers had been superseded by the struggle of the US auto industry against its foreign rivals. The UAW promoted labor-management collaboration, claiming that auto workers had no interests independent of or antagonistic to those of the corporate CEOs and big investors who ran and controlled the auto industry.

While Fraser was identified with this program of labor-management “partnership,” he was by no means its originator. Previous UAW leaders had preached the necessity for a tripartite collaboration of labor, management and government, and Reuther had put this into practice during the conversion of the auto industry into defense production during World War II.

Fraser, no more than his predecessors, was capable of seeing that the logic of his policies would lead to the collapse of the UAW and the American labor movement as a whole. The UAW, which once had 1.5 million members, now has fewer than 500,000.

In the latest labor contracts, negotiated last year, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger accepted the slashing of auto workers' wages and benefits by two-thirds, while the UAW collaborates in the elimination of tens of thousands of additional jobs. The union also accepted the takeover of Chrysler by the private equity firm Cerberus, which is dismantling the company and moving to reduce its workforce by 21,000.

In return, the UAW, which is essentially the instrument of the union bureaucracy, is being given control of a \$50 billion retiree health care trust fund, one of the largest private investment funds in America.

In his remarks, Gettelfinger praised Fraser for the “legacy” he left the UAW. It is precisely that legacy—subservience to capitalism, support for the Democratic Party, and American nationalism—which has produced the disaster facing American auto workers.



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