

Auto workers need an international strategy

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Auto workers around the world confront layoffs, plant closures and new demands for wage and benefit cuts and speedup as transnational automakers attempt to make them pay for the global capitalist crisis.

Last Thursday, Peugeot announced plans to cut 2,700 jobs in addition to the 6,000 jobs the French-based automaker slated for elimination last July. And Daimler AG is said to be considering the introduction of a 30-hour work week at its 14 German plants, as well as putting its 150,000 German employees on a month-long Christmas “holiday.”

Industry analysts in the Czech Republic, which in recent years has become known as the “Detroit of the east,” say that more than 10,000 of the country’s 120,000 auto manufacturing jobs could be eliminated in the coming months.

Mazda, Isuzu, and Nissan have announced plans to eliminate the jobs of 3,200 contract employees at their Japanese operations and Toyota, which cut 2,000 temporary jobs earlier this year, has said it will eliminate an additional 3,800 contract positions by March 2009.

In Thailand, the world’s tenth largest auto exporter, a top auto union official has said that production cuts could result in 30 to 40 percent of the industry’s 500,000 workers losing their jobs.

Production cuts and layoffs have also begun in China, the world’s second largest auto producer. Chery Automobile eliminated 6,000 jobs, or more than 30 percent of its work force this October. Toyota has suspended production at its facility in Guangzhou and Dongfeng-Peugeot Citroen has cut almost a thousand jobs.

In North America, the debate over a bailout of the Detroit-based Big Three has quickly proven to be a conflict within the capitalist elite over how best to make the industry “sustainable”—i.e., a lucrative source of profits for investors—through the destruction of auto workers’ wages,

benefits and jobs.

The US Congress and the Bush administration have handed over trillions to the financial elite with no strings attached. Yet the political and press proponents of the \$25 billion auto bailout package insist that it must be conditional on the United Auto Workers union’s (UAW) assistance in imposing further massive contract concessions on auto workers. The bailout’s establishment opponents, on the other hand, argue that their common goal of creating a “globally competitive industry” could be better achieved by forcing the Big Three into Chapter 11 bankruptcy, which would give them the power to unilaterally slash wages, pensions, and medical benefits.

In Canada, the press and politicians are no less intent on using any auto industry aid package as a means of gutting auto workers’ rights and compensation, and thereby launching a new assault on the working class as a whole. Proclaimed the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of Canada’s financial establishment, “this is a time when auto workers in Canada should... do their share in cutting costs. It is not only companies that need to be competitive, but also workforces.”

European business and political leaders are likewise plotting to use the auto industry crisis as a bludgeon against the working class, wielding the threat of job cuts and plant closures to overcome worker resistance to intensified exploitation. “You can’t compare the car industry with the financial sector—it’s different,” said Neelie Kroes, the European Union’s competition commissioner last week, in explaining why state support for the auto industry should be considered “exceptional,” whereas unlimited funds are being made available to rescue the banks.

To oppose the transnational auto companies’ assault on their jobs and wages, auto workers need a global strategy—a strategy based on a socialist program that rejects the subordination of socio-economic life and human needs to the pursuit of capitalist profit and that recognizes the common class interests of all workers irrespective of nationality.

The fight for such a strategy will require that auto workers politically repudiate and organizationally break from the nationally-based, pro-capitalist unions.

The unions' response to the development of a globally-integrated auto industry has been to compete for the auto bosses' favor, while pitting workers against one another in a fratricidal struggle for a dwindling number of jobs.

The unions have pressed workers to secure product placements and investment by offering capital the highest rate of return, and otherwise served as auxiliaries of management in meeting production and profit targets. This has been accompanied by an ever more explicit promotion of chauvinism and protectionism, which serves to split the working class and rally workers behind one or another rival capitalist elite.

The nationalist, pro-capitalist policy of the unions has proven utterly disastrous for auto workers and for communities dependent on the auto industry. Concessions have failed to "save" jobs, and each round of concessions has led to another, with the globally organized automakers, aided and assisted by the unions, using every fresh giveback as a lever to press workers in another country or at another plant for still more.

Take the case of the Canadian Auto Workers union, founded in 1985 in a nationalist split-off from the UAW. The CAW leadership justified the split by pointing to the reactionary policies of the UAW leadership. But far from constituting a genuine challenge to concessions, the split within the union apparatus served to strengthen the rightwing UAW leadership while removing organizational constraints on the Canadian union bureaucracy pursuing its own right-wing strategy.

This strategy was based on exploiting the labor cost advantage the Big Three enjoyed in Canada due to the lower value of the Canadian dollar and Canada's government-funded health insurance system. It quickly resulted in the CAW making open appeals to the automakers to throw the burden of successive "restructuring" waves onto their "less productive" US plants.

Needless to say, the Big Three welcomed the split as it facilitated their efforts to pit worker against worker.

Two decades later, auto workers in Canada and the US are laden with rival bureaucratic organizations that pursue an

identical pro-company course of imposing concessions and suppressing worker opposition and systemically preventing any joint struggle of North American auto workers against job and wage cuts.

Workers must beware the attempts of the employers, capitalist governments and union bureaucracies to suck them into the impending inter-employer and inter-state struggle over how the world auto industry is to be restructured. Already voices are being raised in Europe denouncing a North American auto bailout as an unfair trade subsidy. Meanwhile, the UAW and CAW are shilling for the Big Three and preparing to once again sacrifice their members' jobs and wages.

In answer to the demands of the employers and governments that they pay for the auto industry crisis, workers should mount a unified struggle across national boundaries and continents against all job cuts and concessions. The auto industry should be freed from the anarchic and socially destructive pursuit of corporate profit and transformed into a public utility under the democratic control of workers.

The prosecution of this struggle requires the independent political mobilization of the working class. Only through the establishment of workers' governments and the socialist transformation of society can a globally-integrated auto industry be placed at the service of humanity, to provide well-paying jobs for working people along with affordable and environmentally sustainable transportation for all.

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