

Why the UAW and the Democrats are pushing economic nationalism

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The naked class character of the proposals for a so-called "bailout" of the US auto makers has become increasingly clear. The crisis of the Big Three companies is being seized upon as an opportunity to drive auto workers back to conditions of poverty and exploitation not seen since the Great Depression.

As a condition for federal loans to avert the imminent bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler, politicians of both big business parties—who handed over trillions of dollars, with no strings attached, to Wall Street—are demanding that auto workers accept mass layoffs and a cut in pay that would lower their wages, in real terms, to less than half that earned by their fathers and grandfathers forty years ago. The United Auto Workers union is fully collaborating in this attack on rank-and-file workers.

With anger among auto workers against the politicians, the companies and the UAW leadership growing by the day, both the Democratic Party and the union are attempting to whip up economic nationalism as a reactionary diversion to pit workers at the Big Three plants against their fellow workers at foreign-owned, non-union plants in the US as well as against auto workers in other countries. The aim is to politically disarm the workers, line them up behind their "own" employers and preempt any struggle in defense of jobs and living standards.

After last week's defeat in Congress of a loan package backed by the Bush administration, the Democrats and the UAW, which called for massive layoffs and wage and benefit concessions, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, a close ally of President-elect Barack Obama, railed against the "un-American behavior" of Senate Republicans who blocked the measure. Those who voted against the bill, she said, were "protecting the foreign companies that are in their borders. They are not acting as Americans."

Her comments were echoed by a series of Democratic politicians and the UAW leadership. In a PBS television interview last weekend, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger denounced the Senate Republicans for backing the "foreign brands" and using taxpayer money to "subsidize the

competition." He added, "We can't compete like this as a country."

With the Big Three companies announcing layoffs and extending Christmas-New Year plant idlings for up to a month, and unemployment soaring in Michigan to 9.6 percent, this attempt to blame the crisis on "foreigners" is evidently having some effect. Police in the Detroit suburb of Woodhaven reported last Friday that the tires of five Japanese and European-made cars were punctured and the vehicles were defaced with "Buy USA" graffiti at a shopping mall parking lot next to a Ford plant.

Auto workers have a long and bitter experience with the snake oil of America-first chauvinism peddled by the UAW bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. It has been nearly 30 years since the UAW, in league with CEO Lee Iacocca, initiated its flag-waving "Buy American" campaign during the 1979-80 Chrysler bailout, which marked the beginning of three decades of wage and benefit concessions.

The denunciations of Japan and Germany, the "Remember Pearl Harbor" bumper stickers and the sledge-hammering of Toyotas and Datsuns in UAW parking lots coincided with the ever-closer integration of the union into the structure of corporate management, including the elevation of then-UAW President Douglas Fraser onto Chrysler's board of directors.

Economic nationalism went hand-in-hand with corporatism and the claim by the UAW that workers had no independent interests separate and apart from those of the auto bosses. In the name of "labor-management partnership" the union suppressed all resistance to plant closures and demands for lower wages and speed-up. To oppose concessions, the UAW argued, was to undermine the "competitiveness" of the American auto companies and give the advantage to foreign companies.

The chauvinism and anti-Asian racism of the UAW will forever be connected with one of the most disgraceful episodes in the history of the American labor movement—the murder of a young Chinese-American named Vincent Chin, who was beaten to death by a Chrysler supervisor and his laid-off

stepson in the Detroit enclave of Highland Park in June 1982.

The economic nationalism of the UAW has produced nothing but a disaster for auto workers, who have seen the destruction of more than 600,000 jobs at General Motors, Ford and Chrysler since 1979 and unending demands for concessions.

For the union bureaucracy, it has been a different story. It has profited from union-management slush funds and joint investment schemes. Although the union has lost two-thirds of its membership, the UAW officialdom has managed to increase its income. Last year it was handed control of a multi-billion-dollar retiree healthcare trust fund and large amounts of company stock in exchange for its agreement to cut new-hires' wages in half.

Automotive production is the most globally integrated industry in the world, drawing on the resources and skills of millions of working people in dozens of countries. In the most profound sense, there is no longer any such thing as a "national" car company. Chrysler produces mini-vans in its US plants for Volkswagen; GM builds cars with local Chinese manufacturers; Volvo, a "Swedish company," is owned by Ford.

The enemy of American auto workers is not the workers of other countries or, for that matter, US workers employed by foreign-owned corporations in Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi. Around the world, the failure of the capitalist profit system is throwing hundreds of thousands of auto workers out of their jobs. Workers' resistance is growing internationally, with protests against layoffs by Nissan workers in Spain, Renault workers in France and the seizure of an auto parts plant in Germany.

All of the achievements of auto workers were won, not on the basis of nationalism, but through a fight for the solidarity of all workers against the corporations and the government. The UAW was founded in the mass strike battles of the 1930s as an international union, uniting US and Canadian workers.

The most class-conscious workers who led the sit-down strikes, many of whom were socialists, insisted on a struggle against all forms of racism and nationalism employed by the corporations to divide and weaken the working class. The revival of the class struggle today depends on an uncompromising struggle against nationalism and for the international unity of the working class.

The logic of the nationalist outlook promoted by the UAW is militarism and war. Increasingly over the last several weeks, leading Democrats have connected federal assistance to the auto industry with the "national security" of the US, i.e., its

ability to quickly arm for war. In a speech on the floor of the Senate last week, Michigan's senior senator, Carl Levin, argued that the industry was key to the development of new armored vehicles, robotics and other wartime technologies that allowed "our soldiers to maintain their edge" on the battlefield.

This theme has been echoed by "left" supporters of the UAW bureaucracy. In a joint op-ed piece published in the *Detroit News*, Mark Brenner and Jane Slaughter from the *Labor Notes* group argued for a government bailout, noting that "Detroit, the Arsenal of Democracy, retooled in a matter of weeks when we needed tanks, not cars, in 1941."

It is an historic fact that the last global economic depression led to the outbreak of world war and the deaths of tens of millions of people, as the various imperialist powers fought for control of markets, raw materials and access to cheap labor. Something even more terrible is being prepared today behind the nationalist demagoguery of big business politicians and their allies in the union bureaucracy.

As events in the US and all over the world are demonstrating, the fundamental division in society is not nation, race or religion, but class. Auto workers in the US face the same basic conditions and the same attacks as their brothers and sisters all over the world. In every country, the corporate-financial elite is seeking to impose the full burden of the failure of its economic system on the backs of the working class.

Confronting a globalized economy dominated by globally operating corporations and banks, auto workers and every other section of the working class must advance their own global strategy to defend their independent class interests. This means a fight to unite workers internationally in a struggle for the overthrow of the existing system, which subordinates all social needs to the profit drive of the monopolists who own and control the means of production, and the establishment of an egalitarian system based on public ownership of basic industry and the banks under the democratic control of the working class—that is, socialism.

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