

A union in name only

22 December 2008

Some of the more astute and honest commentators on the “bailout” of the American auto companies announced Friday by President Bush have pointed to a critical aspect of the plan to shut plants, wipe out jobs and bring the wages, benefits and work rules of United Auto Workers members in line with those of workers at nonunion foreign-owned companies in the US.

“The result,” writes Warren Brown in Saturday’s *Washington Post*, “will be a smaller General Motors and Ford in America, a bigger and more robust GM and Ford overseas, and barring the birth of a truly international labor union, a United Auto Workers that is a union in name only.”

Brown goes on to say that the “restructure-or-perish talk” from all sections of the political establishment, from Bush and Obama to congressional Democrats as well as Republicans, is “justification for helping the car companies continue doing what they have been doing all along—downsizing and, in the process, hastening the effective demise of the UAW.”

The same issue of the newspaper carries an article by Peter Whoriskey, who writes of the wage-and-benefit-cutting provisions of the bailout plan: “Those and other concessions would essentially erase the significant distinctions between union and nonunion auto workers, and the lack of such union worker advantages would render moot the union’s fundamental purpose, some industry analysts and labor experts said.”

The article quotes labor historian David Montgomery as saying that getting “down to the level of foreign companies undermines the meaning of having a union in the first place.”

Such statements appearing in the press point to a fact

that has become all but undeniable. What remains of the historical past of the UAW and the rest of the official unions as workers’ organizations is a purely terminological remnant. In the social role they play, they are organizations through which the demands of the government and the corporations are imposed on the workers. They in no way carry out even the elementary tasks historically associated with unions—mitigating the exploitation of the working class by improving wages and working conditions.

UAW President Ron Gettelfinger personifies the transformation of the UAW. He evinces no trace of class consciousness. The notion that the organization he heads represents a constituency whose social interests are opposed to those of the corporations is beyond his intellectual ken. He views the crisis in the same basic way as the auto bosses, the major shareholders, the bankers and their political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties.

The basic provisions of the government plan have already been accepted by the UAW leadership. Gettelfinger told a press conference on December 12 that he had agreed to the concessions in negotiations with Senate Republicans, opposing only their demand that the cuts be implemented by the end of 2009.

UAW officials want to push back the timing for the imposition of the concessions until 2011, after the current contract has expired, so they can avoid an early rank-and-file vote on the agreement and thus buy more time to force older workers out and replace them with new-hires. Under the current contract, new workers earn \$14.20 an hour, half the pay of veteran workers. This latter pay scale—which when adjusted for inflation is about half of what Big Three workers earned in 1967—is the real benchmark of the “bailout” scheme.

In any event, the plan announced by Bush on Friday incorporates the earlier deadline demanded by the Senate Republicans.

In advocating, alongside the CEOs of the Big Three auto companies, a plan which gives the government vast powers to slash the jobs and living standards of auto workers, the UAW has adopted de facto the position that any form of working class resistance is illegitimate.

What is the logic of the government's plan? Everything must be subordinated to restoring the companies to profitability. Thus, there is no real limit to wage-cutting and speedup. For its part, the union explicitly accepts the goal of making the corporations profitable. Anything that conflicts with this goal—above all, resistance by the workers—must be stopped!

The collapse of the unions and their transformation into open and direct agencies of the corporations and the government is the end result of a protracted process. The roots of their degeneration can be traced all the way back to their origins in the 1930s. Despite arising out of mass struggles of the working class, the UAW and its sister industrial unions rejected a struggle against the framework of capitalism and opposed the building of an independent political party of the working class. After World War II, they joined the Cold War anti-communist witch-hunt, purging socialist and left-wing workers who had played a decisive role in the sit-down strikes and militant battles that built the unions.

The reactionary logic of the bureaucracy's policies emerged clearly when the post-war economic boom began to unravel and American industry came under increasing pressure from foreign competitors, especially in the decade of the 1970s. The response of the UAW and the AFL-CIO was to rally to the defense of American capitalism by partnering with US big business and the government to drive down the living standards of the American working class.

As our movement warned at the time, the 1980 government bailout of Chrysler, in which the UAW accepted the closure of plants and wage concessions in

return for a seat on the company's board of directors, marked a qualitatively new stage in the degeneration of the unions. What followed was an unending series of concessions, culminating today in the UAW's emergence as a central player in the direct impoverishment of the workers it nominally represents.

What flows from this?

Unavoidably and inevitably, workers who enter into struggle against the destruction of their living standards and working conditions will come into conflict with the UAW, the AFL-CIO and the entire union apparatus. The workers who are trapped in these reactionary organizations must break free of them.

An essential element of a fight against the government-corporate offensive—which will rapidly be expanded from the auto workers to every section of the working class—is the formation of democratic rank-and-file organizations independent of and opposed to the official unions. Workers should reject the “left” opportunist groups who demand that they retain their allegiance to the UAW and the rest of the corporate and government-controlled organizations. These tendencies defend the union bureaucracy because they agree with its basic political outlook.

The new rank-and-file organizations should prepare mass strikes, factory occupations and other forms of resistance. What is needed above all is a new political perspective. Industrial action must be combined with the building of a mass political movement of the working class. The only way the working class can assert its own interests is to build its own political party, which aims for the revolutionary transformation of society on socialist foundations. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.

Barry Grey



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact