

UAW accepts government ban on strikes

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It has come to light that the federal bailout of General Motors and Chrysler approved last month by the Bush administration with the support of the incoming Obama administration includes a stipulation that effectively bans strikes or work stoppages by autoworkers.

The clause, which was revealed in a Security and Exchange Commission filing by GM last week, coincides with government demands that the 139,000 workers at Detroit's auto companies agree by February 17 to accept mass layoffs, plant closures and sweeping wage and benefit concessions.

According to the SEC filing, the Treasury Department could declare GM and Chrysler in default and revoke \$17.4 billion in loans, throwing the automakers into bankruptcy, if "any labor union or collective bargaining unit shall engage in a strike or other work stoppage."

The effect of this provision is to revoke the legal right to strike, an achievement won by the American working class in bitter struggles against "criminal conspiracy" laws used against striking workers in the 19th century. It was only with the 1935 passage, in the depths of the Great Depression, of the National Labor Relations Act that federal law recognized the right of workers to strike. This concession to the working class was not some freely given gift of the Roosevelt administration. It followed general strikes that erupted in 1934 in Toledo, Minneapolis and San Francisco. Without the strike weapon, workers are reduced to the status of industrial slaves, legally compelled to accept the most brutal conditions of exploitation without any recourse to collective resistance.

Several commentators have questioned the legality of the anti-strike provision in the auto bailout bill. Nevertheless, under the terms of the bailout, the strike ban remains in effect as long as the auto companies have outstanding loans from the government, setting the stage for contract negotiations in 2011 in which workers would not have the slightest leverage to reject demands for even more draconian givebacks.

This confirms the warnings by the *World Socialist Web Site* that the crisis of the US auto industry is being exploited by the American ruling elite to throw the working class back

to conditions not seen since before the UAW and the other mass industrial unions were built in the 1930s.

Just as the 1980 Chrysler bailout and the smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 initiated a wave of wage-cutting and union-busting in the 1980s and 1990s, the current attack on autoworkers is being used to spearhead a fundamental change in class relations in the US and internationally, under conditions of a global breakdown of the capitalist system.

The organization that ostensibly represents GM and Chrysler workers, the United Auto Workers union, campaigned for the government bailout of the Big Three companies, accepting its stipulations for tens of thousands of layoffs and wage and benefit cuts to bring unionized workers down to the level of non-union workers. It has not uttered a word of protest over the provision banning strikes and work stoppages.

Far from opposing this attack on the democratic rights of autoworkers, the UAW bureaucracy welcomes the ban on strikes as a means of crushing rank-and-file resistance to its collaboration with the auto bosses and the incoming Obama administration.

In a joint appearance at the Detroit auto show with General Motors CEO Rick Wagoner last Thursday, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger told the host of NBC-TV's "Today Show" that the union was committed to making the companies "more competitive" by "modifying" the current union contracts in talks with the Detroit automakers that began this week. The UAW president boasted that the union had already accepted wage cuts and work rule changes that made UAW workers more competitive than non-union workers at US plants operated by Toyota.

For his part, Wagoner praised the UAW, saying he was "confident that we'll come together and get the kind of changes that we need." In exchange for further concessions, the UAW bureaucracy is reportedly seeking a seat on GM's board of directors and an increase in the number of GM shares it presently owns.

An organization that accepts a government ban on the most elementary form of workers' resistance demonstrates thereby its fundamental opposition to the interests of the working class. The UAW's complicity in the so-called

"bailout" of the auto companies, with its provisions for impoverishing the workers and stripping them of their right to strike, is the inevitable outcome of the entire policy of the UAW and the American trade unions as a whole and the culmination of their trajectory over many decades. To argue, under these conditions, that the UAW bureaucracy presides over a genuine workers' organization is to engage in self-delusion or deliberate deception.

For three solid decades the UAW has concentrated its efforts on suppressing the resistance of autoworkers to the destruction of jobs, living standards and working conditions, under the banner of labor-management "partnership" and "Buy American" chauvinism. It has deliberately sought to extirpate all remnants of class consciousness among its members, in order to facilitate its ever closer integration with corporate management and the government. In the figure of Gettelfinger—a man who cannot even conceive of an independent role for the working class, and who views the world entirely from the standpoint of a junior partner of the auto bosses—one sees a concentrated expression of the degeneration and transformation of the UAW.

The roots of this degeneration go back to the earliest stages of the UAW, when it rejected the fight for socialism—the perspective that animated many of the left-wing militants who led the mass strikes and plant occupations that established the union in the 1930s. Walter Reuther and other UAW leaders resisted popular demands for the building of a labor party and tied the newly established unions to the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic Party, blocking the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

The perspective of class collaboration and support for the profit system found its noxious expression in the anti-communist purge of the unions after World War II, which set the stage for the UAW bureaucracy's subsequent betrayals and the ultimate collapse of the union. Having tied the fate of autoworkers to the continued domination of US industry in the world market, the UAW had no response to the globalization of production and the decline in the world position of American capitalism and responded to the growing challenge of Asian and European manufacturers by becoming an enforcer of management's cost-cutting demands.

For years, various factions of the UAW, from "New Directions" to "Soldiers of Solidarity" —and their supporters within the milieu of "left" opportunist organizations—have insisted that autoworkers confine their struggles within the framework of the UAW. They have drawn no lessons from the disasters inflicted on the autoworkers by the policies of the UAW, and continue to claim that the corporatist and bureaucratized organization can be made, through pressure

from below, to fight for the interests of the rank-and-file.

This is a lie. Any struggle by autoworkers to defend their jobs and living standards will immediately pit them against the UAW and pose the necessity to break with it and build new forms of struggle, including factory and workplace committees.

The revival of the workers' movement is possible only on the basis of a radical departure in the practice, politics and philosophy of the working class.

Autoworkers should reject the blackmail of the corporations, the government and the UAW and prepare militant resistance, including mass strikes and demonstrations, against layoffs, factory closings and wage and benefit cuts. This struggle should be broadened to unite every section of the working class in a struggle in defense of jobs and to oppose home foreclosures and the gutting of vital social programs.

The incoming Obama administration, just like its Republican predecessor, will serve the interests of America's financial elite, which is determined to revive the profitability of the auto industry through a permanent reduction in workers' living standards. For working people to advance a solution to the economic crisis that defends their own interests they must break with the Democratic Party and build a mass political party of the working class.

This means building the Socialist Equality Party, which rejects nationalism and fights for the unity of workers in every country on the basis of a socialist program, including the nationalization of the auto industry under the democratic control of working people and the reorganization of the entire economy on the basis of production for human need, not private profit.

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