

Unions, Democrats sponsor reactionary “Keep it Made in America” rallies

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This week a coalition of business groups, union officials and Democratic Party politicians sponsored several “Keep It Made In America” rallies in cities across the Midwest and South. The events were aimed at diverting popular anger over mass layoffs and wage and benefit cuts in the auto industry and channeling workers’ opposition down the reactionary path of economic nationalism and militarism.

Rallies were held in Michigan, Ohio, Missouri, Indiana and other states where tens of thousands of jobs are threatened due to the government restructuring of Chrysler and General Motors and its impact on the auto parts and steel industry. The events—which each attracted crowds of only few hundred at best—were given favorable coverage by the news media, which presented them as a groundswell of popular support for protectionism and “Buy American” campaigns.

The rallies were sponsored by the Alliance for American Manufacturing—which includes US Steel, a company that has laid off thousands of workers in the US and Canada in the last year alone—and the United Steelworkers, which has a long and treacherous record of collaborating in the decimation of workers’ jobs, wages and pensions. Although the United Auto Workers was not listed as an official sponsor, several local and regional UAW officials participated.

Those workers who came to the rallies—mistakenly thinking they could find a way to defend their jobs—were presented with a right-wing and pro-business perspective. The aim of the organizers was to preempt any independent struggle by auto workers by tying them hand and foot to the Obama administration and the declining automakers.

The “Keep It Made In America” coalition, which also includes various Democratic city officials from areas being hit by plant closings, is pushing for increased tax incentives for auto and steelmakers, stricter “domestic content” requirements for the use of federal stimulus money and trade war measures against America’s economic competitors.

Jesse Jackson and various Democratic congressmen spoke at the rallies to provide a political cover for the Obama administration, which is spearheading the attack on auto workers, and to perpetuate the myth that the Democrats speak for working people.

At the rally held Monday in the northern Detroit suburb of Sterling Heights, where Chrysler is closing a major assembly plant next year, Lansing, Michigan Mayor Virg Bernero made a demagogic speech, denouncing the “unholy alliance” between Washington and Wall Street. “It’s bailouts for Wall Street and bull—for Main Street,” Bernero said, failing to mention that it was the Democratic president who was handing trillions to the financial elite, while demanding poverty wages for Chrysler and GM workers.

The pseudo-populist appeals were combined with American chauvinism and efforts to incite hatred against workers in China, Mexico and other countries for stealing jobs. Longtime Michigan Congressman Sander Levin argued that a US-based auto industry was crucial because foreign countries could not be trusted to produce military hardware, presumably because America could be at war with them. “Tanks and armored cars can’t be made in China, Germany or Japan,” he insisted.

Last week, the UAW, which has marched in lockstep with Obama in demanding that auto workers accept massive job losses and wage and benefit concessions, denounced GM for a restructuring plan that would close

plants in the US while maintaining production in China, Mexico and South Korea.

This theme was taken up by the next speaker at the rally, Bill Parker, the president of UAW Local 1700 at Chrysler's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant. Parker's nationalist tirade was particularly significant because of his political background, which included membership in the International Socialist group in the 1960s and 1970s.

Like a host of other ex-middle class radicals who defend the UAW, he has found a position inside the organization's apparatus, in this case, as the chairman of the Chrysler National Bargaining Committee. In that capacity, he recently negotiated the sell-out agreement, which sacrifices the gains of generations of auto workers in exchange for the UAW obtaining a 55 percent ownership stake in the restructured Chrysler.

Parker feigned surprise that less than a day after "voting through a concessionary contract intended to keep Chrysler plants open," the company announced the closing of eight plants, including his own.

He offered no accounting for the claim made by the UAW that accepting concessions would prevent Chrysler from filing for bankruptcy and "save" jobs. Instead, like the other speakers, he deflected attention from the role of the UAW and the Obama administration by shifting the blame onto foreign workers.

Parker listed several of the targeted plants, including St. Louis, Missouri, Kenosha, Wisconsin and Sterling Heights, and complained that while they were being shut, equivalent production was going to continue in Windsor, Canada and Saltillo and Toluca, Mexico.

"There's not one single Chrysler plant closing outside American borders," Parker complained, suggesting it was in the interests of US auto workers to demand that Canadian and Mexican workers be thrown out of their jobs instead.

This nationalist poison is designed to drive a wedge between American workers and their brothers and sisters internationally who are facing a common struggle against the attack on their jobs and living standards. The planned takeover of Chrysler and GM Europe by Italian automaker Fiat is expected to lead to more than 10,000 job cuts throughout Europe. Analysts predict that the global downturn in the car sales—which are expected to fall from 70 million to 50 million—will

lead to a new wave of mergers and bankruptcies, leaving no more than six global auto giants, and hundreds of thousands of auto workers out of their jobs.

The flag-waving nationalism of the UAW hasn't saved a single job since the UAW joined the auto bosses in joint "Buy American" campaigns in 1970s and 1980s. In the name of "saving American jobs," the UAW suppressed every struggle against mass layoffs, concessions and speedups, declaring that any resistance to the employers would undermine the competitive position of the US automakers. The result has been the loss of three-quarters of a million jobs at Chrysler, Ford and GM over the last three decades.

If workers are not to be forced into a fratricidal struggle over who will keep a job at the lowest wages and worst conditions—and ultimately be dragged into a new world war—they must reject the nationalist program of the trade unions in the US and internationally, and mount a common struggle to defend the jobs of all workers in every country, based on a socialist alternative.

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