

New York Times on the UAW's corporatism: a rewriting of history

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On June 2, the *New York Times* published a column by writer Steven Greenhouse describing the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) as a long-time antagonist of the Big Three US automakers, only temporarily reined in by a tenuous harmony of interests among union, business, and government.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Far from defending the interests of auto workers, the UAW has conspired with the Obama administration and its Auto Task Force to shift the crisis onto the backs of the workers it falsely claims to represent through plant closures, layoffs, wage and benefits cuts, and the gutting of workplace rules.

Greenhouse admits that the UAW will now be a corporate owner—he refers to this delicately as “a novel dual role.” He acknowledges that the “union” will “help management increase profitability—with the goal of pushing up the automakers’ stock prices”; that it has outlawed strikes against Chrysler and GM; and that in recent years “the union has worked with management to assure labor peace, raise productivity and...push down labor costs.”

Yet at the same time Greenhouse depicts the UAW as an unpredictable fighting force for workers, struggling to balance the interests of its membership with the survival of the auto industry. The columnist wonders whether the new contracts can end the “antagonistic relationship between union and management” or if instead the UAW “will stick to its traditional truculence.” The UAW has been, he claims, “by turns, hard-charging adversary and strategic partner.”

Summing up his false presentation of the UAW, Greenhouse declares, “For decades the United Automobile Workers had a simple strategy for getting what it wanted from carmakers—it would go out on

strike.”

This presentation of the UAW begs the question: On what planet has Greenhouse resided for the past four decades? In fact, the UAW has long cultivated a corporatist policy of close collaboration with the auto companies.

The *Times* labor columnist’s interpretation of the UAW and its methods might have made a modicum of sense in 1970, the last time a major strike gripped the US auto industry. The 1970 GM strike, involving nearly 400,000 workers, shocked the bureaucracy. Though it ended in limited gains for rank-and-file auto workers, the two-month-long struggle nearly exhausted the UAW strike fund. From that moment on, top UAW officials sought to prevent, at all costs, long industry-wide strikes.

Since 1979, the UAW’s history is an unbroken chain of concessions and betrayals. That year, the UAW agreed to give up major concessions from Chrysler workers in order to secure government money for Chrysler’s bailout. In the midst of the negotiations, orchestrated by the Carter administration, Chrysler closed down its massive Dodge Main plant in Hamtramck, near Detroit. The UAW stifled worker opposition to Dodge Main’s destruction, and then forced through the concession demands of the government.

The Chrysler bankruptcy and the shutdown of Dodge Main set the pattern for the next thirty years. Beginning in the 1980s, the UAW sought to isolate and smother strikes of union locals, including at auto parts makers. At the same time, it moved to strip locals of their ability to authorize their own work actions. The bureaucracy oversaw the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, even as its own income and privileges continued to grow, all the while veiling its complicity by scapegoating auto workers in Japan, Germany, and elsewhere.

The UAW’s two-day strike “against” GM in 2007 was in fact a public relations stunt, orchestrated by union

executives with the aim of preparing the rank-and-file for a massive concessions contract that included the establishment of a multi-billion dollar retiree health fund (the voluntary employees' beneficiary association or VEBA) which the bureaucracy would control, giving it a direct monetary interest in the impoverishment of auto workers.

During a three-month long strike in 2008 by workers at American Axle, a major parts supplier with factories in Michigan and New York, the UAW forestalled solidarity action from other auto workers. It offered striking workers a measly \$200 per week from its misnamed strike fund, which is currently estimated at nearly \$900 million.

Through its enormous assets—\$1.2 billion according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* estimate—and other streams of revenue, the UAW has effectively insulated itself from the massive job losses it has overseen. In 1979, the UAW had 1.5 million members. By 2008, this had fallen to 431,000, with job losses accelerating in recent months. Even though membership in the UAW declined by 40 percent between 2000 and 2008, UAW officials increased their combined salaries by more than \$11 million.

The fate of the UAW is the outcome of long historical processes bound up with the fortunes of American capitalism. When it was built in the 1930s, the rank-and-file leadership of the union was dominated by socialists—including Trotskyists—and militants. Even Walter Reuther (UAW president, 1946-1970) in the 1930s presented himself as a socialist.

However, Reuther and the UAW—and the American trade unions as a whole—made a pact with American capitalism, agreeing not to challenge the profit system and eschewing all earlier demands for expanding democratic control of the production process. This was closely bound up with a political marriage to the Democratic Party.

During WWII, the UAW subordinated workers to the US war effort through the no strike pledge. Reuther promised that Detroit's auto factories would be the "arsenals of democracy." In the early post-war period Reuther and the UAW bureaucrats purged the socialists and militants from the unions, and in 1955 he led the industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) back into the arms of the reactionary American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Reuther wagered that the UAW would maintain its power, and win some concessions for workers, based on the global dominance of the American Big Three. The union's fortunes, Reuther proclaimed, were not separate from the Big Three and American imperialism.

The failure of this perspective was demonstrated with the sharp decline of the Big Three's global market share beginning in the late 1960s. But the bureaucracy's nationalist perspective remained. Its role was to make "its workers" competitive in the global market by joining with the Big Three in wringing concessions and overseeing factory shutdowns.

The UAW's efforts have failed to stem the crisis of profitability in the US auto industry. Now that the UAW has become the major owner of Chrysler and the second largest owner of GM, it has a direct interest in driving down the wages of auto workers in order to drive up the stock value of the Big Three.

The UAW, Inc. rejects the notion, once an a-b-c of even the most tepid trade unionism, that workers have interests independent of their employers. Indeed, it is the UAW's interests that are now diametrically opposed to those of the workers from whom it continues to collect dues.

Greenhouse's falsification of the UAW and its history is no accident. That is precisely his beat at the *Times*. He is paid to write tributes to the union bureaucracy in order to polish its credentials for the newspapers' upper middle class readership.

Though the trade unions can no longer claim to represent workers, these organizations have not exhausted their usefulness. In addition to wresting concessions from and policing workers on behalf of business, the ex-unions play a critical role in suppressing the political independence of the working class. It is for this reason that Greenhouse paints the UAW in false colors.



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