

The GM bankruptcy and the middle-class “left” organizations

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The forced bankruptcies of General Motors and Chrysler have been a devastating yet politically revealing experience for the working class. In a matter of months, the Obama administration has decimated two American industrial icons and imposed a rollback in the conditions of auto workers that no Republican president had ever attempted.

In carrying out this attack, Obama has relied on the United Auto Workers union (UAW) to block any resistance from rank-and-file workers. In return, the UAW apparatus has been given a large chunk of the shares of the two restructured automakers, on the basis of which it hopes, along with other Wall Street investors, to reap large profits.

It is becoming increasingly apparent to workers that they were sold a bill of goods about Obama. Far from championing their interests—as the UAW promised—the Democratic president has functioned as a ruthless tool of the financial elite. This bitter experience has demonstrated once again that the UAW is a hostile force whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the workers it claims to represent.

The auto bankruptcies and resulting layoffs, plant closures and cuts in pay and benefits have underscored that the prerequisite for any struggle by auto workers is the building of rank-and-file organizations independent of and opposed to the UAW.

In the wake of the bankruptcy filings, a number of ostensibly “left” groups that are oriented to the UAW apparatus and the Democratic Party are working to block a struggle by auto workers against the Obama administration and its UAW allies.

A case in point is a demonstration held last week outside GM’s Detroit headquarters, which was part of a four-day “People’s Summit and Tent City” called to protest a meeting of corporate executives and politicians sponsored by the Detroit Economic Club.

The People’s Summit, which was chiefly organized by the Workers World Party, received the semi-official support of the Detroit City Council and was publicized by the local news media. It featured speeches by Jesse Jackson and Detroit Councilwoman JoAnn Watson.

There was not a single statement of opposition to Obama in any of the speeches by members of the participating “left” organizations.

Among the organizations involved in the GM headquarters protest was a group called Auto Worker Caravan, which was set up by dissident UAW officials, including former International Representative Frank Hammer and UAW New Directions supporter Gregg Shotwell, along with several individuals associated with the Labor Notes group. These include Wendy Thomson, the former president of UAW Local 235 in Detroit. Thompson played a key role in backing the UAW as it betrayed last year’s American Axle strike. Another leading spokesperson for the Auto Worker Caravan is Diane Feeley, a supporter of Thomson in Local 235 and an editor of *Against the Current*, who describes herself as a “socialist feminist.”

The speakers from the groups that organized the protest made it clear that they were not seeking to mobilize auto workers against the carve-up of the auto industry by the Obama administration. On the contrary, they pitched themselves as would-be advisors to the Democratic president, who hoped to get his ear on how best to restructure the auto industry.

Hammer and Shotwell expressed support for a single-payer health care plan, arguing that a reduction in employer-paid medical costs would make US automakers more competitive against the Japanese and Europeans. “GM loves the free health care in Canada. Why can’t we have it here?” Hammer asked, adding, “We have to pressure Barack Obama to do the right thing.”

Shotwell repeated the argument, saying, “We need a single-payer health system. It can save the companies \$1,400 a vehicle.”

Shotwell insisted that the UAW could be transformed into a fighting organization and the Obama administration persuaded to represent working people. “We need to repossess our unions,” he declared. “We need to repossess our government to make it a government of the people.”

Although a few speakers claimed to support auto workers in other countries, the event was dominated by the “Buy American” nationalist politics of the UAW. This was underscored by a speaker from UAW Local 1700 at the Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly plant, which is targeted for closure. He complained that the company was not shutting any factories in Canada or Mexico.

After years of adapting to the Democratic Party—through the vehicle of identity politics, Green Party environmentalism and other forms of middle-class reformist politics—the “left” opportunist groups are now offering their services in covering up the class character of the Obama administration.

Their support for the Democratic Party is bound up with their backing for the UAW. They all oppose any struggle that challenges the stranglehold of the union apparatus over the workers, insisting that the authority and discipline of the UAW be upheld.

In a leaflet issued earlier this year, the Auto Worker Caravan hailed Obama’s firing of General Motors CEO Richard Wagoner, claiming it was a “welcomed use of public power” that showed how the people, through their “elected representatives,” can “change corporate CEOs.”

In fact, the removal of Wagoner—who had opposed the government’s plans to drive GM into bankruptcy—cleared the way for the implementation of Wall Street’s long-standing plans to break up the biggest US automaker and thereby set a precedent for attacking every section of the working class.

The Auto Worker Caravan claimed that workers could protect their interests within the framework of bankruptcy if they appealed to Obama to convert GM into a “public trust” to “produce fuel efficient automobiles and electric cars, and branch out into green energy technologies, such as wind turbines, and mass transportation such as light rail and high-speed trains.”

The Workers World Party went even further in promoting the interests of the UAW executives in a June 10 article in their newspaper, which demanded that “a good piece of the trillion dollars going to the auto companies and the banks” be turned over to the union. Workers World’s subservience to the labor-bureaucrats-turned-business-entrepreneurs took the absurd form of equating UAW “management teams” with workers’ control of the factories.

Any worker familiar with the UAW-sponsored labor-management committees that have proliferated over the past quarter century can only shudder at the idea of the UAW directly taking over the management of the plants. This would have far more in common with the fascist syndicates of Mussolini’s Italy than with workers’ control of production.

Knowing full well the level of disgust among auto workers for the UAW, the Workers World Party does its best to maintain the fiction that the organization can be transformed if enough pressure is exerted on its top leadership. In the above-mentioned article, they write, “The task is to take back the unions for the rank-and-file and turn them into fighting organizations that truly represent the interests of the workers.... Although it is a mighty task, it can and must be done. Workers’ futures and the futures of their children depend upon it.”

On the contrary, the future of the working class depends on a break with these corporatist entities masquerading as workers’ unions and the development of new, independent organs of

struggle.

No small reason for the hostility of Workers World, Labor Notes and other opportunist “left” groups to such a development is the fact that their ranks include a good number of ex-radicals who have obtained lucrative positions within the apparatus of the UAW and other unions.

They fully share the class hostility of the UAW officialdom—a parasitic upper-middle-class social stratum—toward the workers. This was made clear in comments by Dianne Feeley at a “Left Forum” held last April in New York.

Explaining the purpose of the Auto Worker Caravan, she said, “What we are trying to do with our little rank-and-file group is to develop a forward-looking culture, which is very different from the culture inside the UAW, which is just a continuation of the politics of resentment, and where workers are encouraged to have a consumerist attitude.”

As an example of this supposed consumerism, she impersonated an imaginary worker shouting at a UAW official, “I pay my dues money every month. What am I getting for my dues money?” She added, “But it’s not like that. We have to encourage people to understand that they have to take responsibility for themselves, for their lives, for their futures.”

Here Feeley gives vent to the contempt and hatred felt by the army of UAW functionaries toward the workers whose interests they betray on a daily basis. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate that any fight against the Obama-UAW carve-up of auto will mean a fight against the reactionary “left” apologists of the UAW and the Democratic Party.

To fight plant closings and the destruction of wages, pensions, healthcare and working conditions, auto workers must strike out on an independent course, establishing rank-and-file committees and reviving the class-struggle traditions that built the industrial unions in the 1930s. Above all, workers must adopt a new political perspective.

The defense of jobs and living standards requires a break with the two parties of big business and a political struggle for socialism. We say to all auto workers: Build the Socialist Equality Party to fight for the international unity of the working class and a workers’ government! Fight for a socialist program to nationalize basic industry and the banks under the democratic control of the working population! Only in this way can the financial dictatorship of Wall Street be broken and the economy be reorganized on the basis of social need, not profit.



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