

# The “No” vote at Ford

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The decisive vote by Ford workers to reject the concessions contract worked out between the company and the United Auto Workers is a major advance not only for Ford workers, but for all auto workers and the working class as a whole, both in the US and internationally.

The resounding “No” vote—about 75 percent overall and over 90 percent at several locals—demonstrated great determination and courage in the face of threats and intimidation by the company, the union and the media. The vote has underscored the fact that the working class is prepared to fight to defend its jobs and living standards, and that the main obstacles to waging such a struggle are the so-called “unions”—such as the UAW—which function as business partners and industrial police of the corporations.

The vote is an expression of growing resistance in the working class to soaring unemployment, wage cuts and speedup, on the one side, and government bailouts for the banks and record bonuses for Wall Street, on the other. The vote at Ford will encourage workers throughout the auto industry and in other sections of the economy to take a similar stand against attacks by the corporations, backed by the Obama administration.

The vote is a historical milestone. It is the first rejection of a national contract since 1982, and the first at Ford since 1976. In the intervening three decades, the UAW has devoted all of its energies to suppressing the resistance of auto workers. It has helped push through repeated wage and benefit concessions, while overseeing the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs. Some 750,000 auto jobs have been wiped out, including more than 130,000 at Ford alone.

While the vote is an important first step, workers should be under no illusion that by rejecting the contract they have defeated the concessions demands. Ford and the UAW were taken aback by the “No” vote and the scale of the rank-and-file repudiation of the contract. They have said they will not attempt a re-vote, no doubt because they have concluded that they cannot get a reversal at this time. Pointing to the expiration of the current contract in 2011,

however, UAW president Ron Gettelfinger declared, “We are not going to give up.”

There can be no doubt that the UAW is in intensive discussions with Ford on how best to impose the company’s demands. As the vote was still going on, local union officials circulated a petition seeking a re-vote at Sterling Axle in Michigan, claiming the company was threatening to move production elsewhere. This was cited by UAW officials at other locals in an attempt to blackmail workers into voting “Yes.”

These threats will be intensified. There will be a drive to impose concessions in work rules and other productivity measures. The threat of removing work, cutting jobs and shifts and even closing entire plants will be used to pit plant against plant and local against local, and to pit American workers against workers in Canada and elsewhere in order to divide, weaken and demoralize the work force.

To counter such efforts, it is critical that the defeat of the contract become the starting point for a wider offensive by rank-and-file workers against both the company and the UAW.

It is not a question of pressuring the UAW or voting in “new leadership,” as advocated by various dissident factions within the UAW apparatus. The UAW is a union in name only. It is a major shareholder of the Big Three auto companies. Its finances and the salaries of its executives are dependent on the ability of the auto companies to extract greater profits by cutting jobs and wages and increasing the exploitation of the workers.

It is necessary for workers to act independently. Ford workers should establish rank-and-file committees in opposition to the UAW. A campaign should be developed throughout the auto industry to prepare strike action and plant occupations to reverse the wage and benefit cuts already imposed and halt layoffs and plant closures.

In voting against the concessions, Ford workers are casting a no-confidence vote in the UAW. After decades of concessions, the organization is rightly regarded by workers with contempt and disgust. Bound up with the

bankrupt policies of this organization, however, are fundamental issues: its support for the Democratic Party and the two-party system, its nationalist perspective, and its defense of capitalism.

The latest attacks on auto workers have been orchestrated by the Obama administration. Despite promises of “change,” one of Obama’s first actions was to demand that workers at GM and Chrysler accept new cuts in wages and benefits, while forcing through a bankruptcy process that has resulted in the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs.

The contract repudiated by Ford workers was modeled on the concessions imposed at GM and Chrysler by Obama’s auto task force. This was aimed at spearheading a broader assault on the wages and living standards of the working class as a whole. This is well underway. Since Obama forced GM and Chrysler into bankruptcy, wage-cutting has spread throughout every sector of the US economy.

Like his predecessor Bush, Obama is a representative of the most powerful sections of the financial elite, which is determined to make the working class pay for the multi-trillion-dollar bank bailouts and place the burden of the crisis of American capitalism on the backs of working people.

The Obama administration demonstrates the futility of workers seeking to defend their interests within the framework of the existing political system dominated by two parties of big business. Independent industrial action by workers must be combined with a new political perspective—the building of a mass party of the working class to fight for a workers’ government.

Nationalism has long been a hallmark of the UAW and the entire AFL-CIO apparatus. In order to undermine class-consciousness and tie workers to the interests of the Big Three, the UAW has promoted the lie that workers in the US can defend their interests by increasing the competitiveness of their “own” companies and opposing the struggles of workers in Mexico, Canada, Europe and Asia.

The auto industry, like the capitalist system as a whole, is globally organized. By pitting workers of different countries against each other, the corporations have been able to push through an attack on workers in every country. A fight against this attack requires the international solidarity of workers, based on the recognition that class, not nation, is the fundamental division in society.

Above all, auto workers confront the question of

capitalism—a social system based on private ownership of the banks and corporations. Decisions that affect the lives of millions, including what goods are produced and how the resources of society are distributed, are made on the basis of how to best secure the wealth of a tiny layer of the population that controls the basic levers of economic life.

For decades, the political establishment, with the close collaboration of the AFL-CIO, has worked tirelessly to promote the illusion that capitalism can guarantee a decent standard of living for workers. The witch-hunting of socialists and relentless anti-socialist propaganda have left the working class without a perspective to fight the onslaught by the corporations.

Socialism means the organization of economic life to serve social needs, not private profit. It means turning the giant economic forces, including the global auto monopolies, into publicly-owned and democratically-controlled utilities. It means the expropriation of the wealth of the financial and corporate elite, presently fattening itself on the social misery of millions, and the redirection of social resources to solve the pressing problems facing the world’s population.

The vote at Ford is further evidence that the past year has not passed in vain. The economic crisis has helped destroy illusions in the capitalist system and all those organizations—including the pro-corporate “unions”—that are based on the defense of this system.

The growth of mass opposition in the working class is inevitable. At present, this opposition is in its first stages, and its broader implications and significance are not yet understood by the majority of workers. As a new period of social struggle opens up, the critical question is the construction of a new socialist leadership in the working class, based on the understanding that nothing short of the revolutionary transformation of world society can resolve the crisis in the interests of the working class.

We urge workers who agree with this perspective to contact the SEP today and take up the fight for socialism.

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