

UAW installs Bob King as new president

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The leaders of the United Auto Workers union last week selected UAW Vice President Bob King to replace current president Ron Gettelfinger, who is retiring. The organization's 13-member executive board as well as the ruling Administrative Caucus unanimously backed King, who is expected to be elected without opposition at the organization's constitutional convention next June.

Like Gettelfinger, King has a long record of collaborating with the auto bosses and betraying auto workers, while upholding the interests of the UAW apparatus. While the anointment of another company man is hardly surprising, it is nonetheless noteworthy for what it says about the brazen contempt the UAW has for its members.

In November, Ford workers voted down a concessions contract negotiated by King by a margin of 70 percent. It was the first rejection of a national auto contract recommended by the UAW since 1982 and at Ford since 1976. In the days leading up to the vote, King was repeatedly booed and driven off the stage when he sought to sell the deal to workers in Michigan, Missouri and other states.

As head of the negotiations with Ford, King pushed through the "transformational" contract in 2007, which, among other things, reduced the wages of new hires from \$28 to \$14 an hour. In the first wave of 2009 contract "modifications," he once again pushed through concessions, including stripping hundreds of thousands of Ford retirees and their dependents of optical and dental care.

However, the attempt to push through concessions that had been imposed on GM and Chrysler workers as part of Obama's forced restructuring of the two companies met with defeat. Within days, Ford announced it had made \$1 billion for the third quarter, chiefly through downsizing and other cost-cutting measures carried out in conjunction with the UAW.

Despite his treacherous role—or more precisely, because of it—UAW executives handpicked King to replace the outgoing president. The fact that he had been repudiated by the membership did not have the slightest effect on his selection, Gettelfinger told reporters, saying it had no bearing on King's ability to run the union. "There is no question in my mind Bob King will be the right person to lead the union forward. He is relentless and tenacious."

Indeed, throughout his career, King has been relentless ... in his defense of the auto corporations and Ford in particular. Responding to the nomination, Ford's executive chairman, Bill Ford Jr., said, "I've known Bob for a long time. He cares very deeply for the industry and for Ford."

Ford America's President Mark Fields added, "We respect Bob a lot. We're going to continue to work with Bob and the rest of the UAW team to make sure Ford remains competitive. We don't just talk to the UAW when we have an issue. We talk to the UAW every day, every week, about the challenges we face as a business and our strategy for overcoming those challenges."

For his part, King pledged to "collectively" outline a plan for the union "based on the great work that Ron [Gettelfinger] has done."

The eight years Gettelfinger ran the UAW were an unmitigated disaster for auto workers. Under his tenure, the UAW collaborated in the shutdown of dozens of GM, Ford and Chrysler factories and pressured tens of thousands of workers to take buyouts.

According to its annual financial report filed with federal regulators on Monday, the UAW lost 33,873 members in the past year alone, ending with 430,000 members. At its peak in the early 1970s there were 1.5 million UAW members. The UAW workforce at Ford has fallen from 174,000 in 1978 to 41,000 today.

At the same time, the UAW apparatus established

new business relations with the employers and Wall Street to secure the income of its executives and officials, even as membership rolls fell by nearly 40 percent. With its control of the multi-billion retiree health care trust fund, also known as a Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Association or VEBA, the UAW now has a 17.5 percent ownership stake at GM, 55 percent of Chrysler and roughly 25 percent of Ford. In order to defend its investments, the UAW is widely expected to impose drastic reductions when it takes over the provision of retiree health care in January 2010.

It is no wonder the UAW is impervious to the sentiments of its members. This puts the lie to all the claims by dissident factions and their middle class “left” supporters who said the defeat of the Ford contract would lead to reform of the union and election of leaders answerable to the rank and file.

King, like his predecessor, had no connection to the earlier struggles of the working class. On the contrary, his father was a director of industrial relations for Ford management. King went to work at the company in 1970 after earning a political science degree from the University of Michigan in 1968 and serving two years with the US Army in South Korea. His years as an electrical apprentice at a Ford parts depot in Detroit—where he worked while finishing a law degree at the University of Detroit—were largely a stepping-stone for a career in the UAW.

A member of the UAW International Skilled Trades Advisory Committee, he was elected vice president of Local 600—at Ford’s huge River Rouge complex—in 1981 and then local president in 1984. In 1987 he was re-elected and became chair of the UAW-Ford Negotiating Committee.

During this period King was promoted as a “progressive labor leader,” by various middle class protest organizations. Local 600 hosted rallies against South African apartheid and other activities aimed at concealing the right-wing and chauvinist character of the AFL-CIO. At the same time, King established relations with the New Directions faction of the UAW bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, King imposed one concession after another on Local 600 workers at Ford Rouge, while promoting Ford’s corporatist “Employee-Involvement” program. While local president he negotiated the sell-

off of the Rouge complex’s steel division to a succession of outside corporations, which slashed the workforce and gutted pensions.

Such actions brought him favor at the UAW’s Solidarity House headquarters, which elevated King to UAW Region 1A director, national vice president in charge of auto parts production and then Ford in 1998. King helped slash the wages and benefits of workers at Ford’s suppliers in order to cut costs for the auto maker. In exchange, Ford pressured Johnson Controls and other suppliers to recognize the UAW, which quickly signed sweetheart deals with them.

King also backed Ford’s spin-off of its parts division, Visteon, in 2000. In May, the company filed for bankruptcy. It is currently in the process of dumping the pensions of 100,000 retirees and dependents into the government’s Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, where they will be cut by at least \$100 million.

The promotion of such a man underscores the real character of the UAW. It is not a workers’ organization, nor is it subject to the democratic control of its members. On the contrary, it is the business enterprise of a layer of increasingly wealthy union executives whose interests are diametrically opposed to the working class.



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