

Anger toward UAW erupts at California auto workers meeting

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Anger among workers at the New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. (NUMMI) plant in Fremont, California, toward the United Auto Workers (UAW) exploded at a January 24 meeting discussing the imminent closure of the facility. Nearly 5,000 workers will lose their jobs when the plant, formerly a joint venture of General Motors and Toyota, closes on March 31. Four hundred or so workers were present at the meeting.

Several attendees captured the eruption on video, which began during comments by UAW Local 2244 Bargaining Chairman Javier Contreras. Contreras was booed, jeered, and interrupted as he attempted to present details of the severance package. At one point an outraged older worker demanded to know “where the hell” the union official had been for the last six months. Contreras burst out, “Shut the f— up, you motherf—!” At that point, furious workers rushed to the front of the room. Contreras and other local UAW personnel were defended by a few union officials. Local union leaders pleaded for calm and called in the police in a bid to control the workers.

Workers present say that the yelling began because union officials would not allow them to speak. Workers are angry that they have been kept in the dark over UAW negotiations with NUMMI.

The video footage reveals that the UAW, on the one hand, and rank-and-file auto workers, on the other, make up two mutually hostile camps. The workers bristle with mistrust and contempt for the union; the UAW officials are defensive and thuglike. The episode exposes the UAW’s role in executing the layoff and wage cut dictates of business—as well as their unmistakable contempt for the workers they nominally represent.

General Motors ended its participation in NUMMI in

June 2009 as part of its forced bankruptcy at the hands of the Obama administration. Toyota then announced it would no longer continue operations there as of March 2010, blaming GM’s unilateral withdrawal from the partnership.

The UAW, which played a critical role in the bankruptcy process for GM and Chrysler by imposing plant closures and wage and benefit cuts while stifling worker opposition, has fallen back on its usual stock-in-trade of chauvinism and jingoism. It has singled out Toyota for attack, recently organizing a nationalist rally in Washington, D.C., outside the Japanese consulate that was attended by a handful of officials and their hangers-on.

Many workers at NUMMI have emphatically rejected the anti-Japanese rhetoric. Speaking of the explosive meeting, a long-time auto worker, Ken Villegas, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that “the general tenor of the rank-and-file complaints were that union leaders should go after GM, as well as Toyota,” along with complaints over secretive severance negotiations.

Another *Chronicle* report confirms that the anger at the union meeting stemmed in part from the one-sided attack on Toyota. “Rank-and-file members harangued leaders that day for conducting a campaign against Toyota over the impending closure while not going after General Motors,” it wrote.

A NUMMI worker, when asked by a reporter with the Labor Video Project about the UAW protest outside the Japanese consulate in Washington, expressed outrage. “That was these guys,” he said of the local union officials. “I don’t know what the hell that is! Why blame Toyota? One of the reasons they don’t blame GM—I don’t know what the percentage is—but they own a portion of GM. Are you going to shoot yourself in the foot? No, they’re not going to do that. The problem is

the membership doesn't have a voice."

Another worker denounced the UAW and the Obama along similar lines. "If Toyota owes us doesn't that mean General Motors owes us too?" he asked. "And does the fact that [UAW President Ron] Gettelfinger sold us out for 17.5 percent of General Motors stock have anything to do with violating our charter and the severe conflict of interest? How can you trust your representatives? They've got to look at both ledgers. They've got to make sure those 17.5 percent of shares grow—and at whose expense?"

"We know they're going on trips to Palm Springs," another worker said of the UAW officials. "There was a photograph circulating in the plant of them laying on lawn chairs and drinking margaritas."

The UAW is trying to handcuff workers until the plant is shut down, while it seeks to secure more perks for union officials from Toyota. It is pushing a severance package that would bar workers from taking action in the plant's last two months, a proposal that "would link workers' departure payouts to the continued, smooth operation of the factory through its closing," according to the *Chronicle*. Workers are also outraged that the UAW is demanding a share of whatever severance pay they receive.

Negotiations with NUMMI have been strung out by the UAW demand that the maximum severance package be increased to more than \$60,000. This would benefit only a handful of workers and, of course, union officers. Union executives are also demanding a \$72 million contribution from NUMMI to a health insurance program controlled by the UAW. "Most of the people working at the plant won't even be eligible for it," one worker told a reporter. "It's mainly for the UAW as a whole rather than for the local."

Local 2244 President Sergio Santos declared that if NUMMI does not meet the bureaucracy's demands for cash, it "would be a slap in the face to American workers."

The UAW has in fact done nothing to keep the plant open. In interviews, workers derided a local UAW petition drive, noting that while it was being circulated, machinery was being removed from the plant.

The NUMMI closure will lead directly to 1,400 more layoffs in the local parts industry, and indirectly to thousands more. This is in California, where the unemployment rate is already at 12.4 percent and where

vital social services have been scaled back due to the worst of the nation's state budget crises.

NUMMI's suppliers have in recent days announced their own major layoffs. Johnson Controls has said it will close its Livermore plant, resulting in 321 layoffs, with 240 of these coming in late March, timed to coincide with the closure of NUMMI. In addition to the 4,700 jobs lost at NUMMI, Fremont will see an additional 314 parts and supply jobs vanish. The city of Hayward will lose 387 jobs after the closure of Injex Industries. Modesto will lose 186 jobs with the shutdown of Trim Master, Inc. Stockton will suffer 154 job losses after Kyoho Manufacturing closes, and Merced will lose 53 jobs after Arvin Sango shuts its doors.



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