

UAW holds nationalist rally at NUMMI plant in California

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25 February 2010

On February 12, the United Auto Workers held a rally ostensibly to save NUMMI—the New United Motors and Manufacturing, Inc. plant in Fremont, California, a former joint venture between General Motors and Toyota. In fact, the event was a stunt aimed at channeling opposition to the plant closure in a nationalist, anti-Japanese direction.

The rally was sparsely attended by workers, reflecting widespread disgust with the UAW. It was a media event organized by the union apparatus, which the vast majority of workers rightly see as complicit in the closure of the plant. Some 4,500 workers will lose their jobs when the plant closes March 31.

Last month, anger among auto workers boiled over at a Local 2244 meeting, with workers nearly coming to blows with union functionaries. (See “The class divide between US auto workers and the UAW”)

The main speakers at the rally were all enemies of the working class—including AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, who helped destroy thousands of miners’ jobs as head of the United Mine Workers; UAW Vice President Bob King, next president of the UAW, who negotiated contract concessions at Ford last year that were resoundingly rejected by auto workers; and Democratic Party officials who have helped carry out the destruction of social programs and jobs throughout the state.

In June 2009, GM pulled out of the NUMMI joint venture. GM’s decision assured the eventual closure of the plant, which Toyota announced in September of last year. This was part of bankruptcy proceedings overseen by the Obama administration that led to the shutting of dozens of plants and massive attacks on auto workers throughout the country. The UAW fully agreed with the GM pullout, and it supported the bankruptcy process as a whole, which was aimed at boosting GM profitability

on the backs of workers. No union official has proposed boycotting GM, Chrysler or Ford over their attack on auto workers.

In exchange for abandoning and impoverishing thousands of the workers it nominally represents, the UAW was richly rewarded with control over the multibillion-dollar retirement health insurance program—the Voluntary Employee Benefit Association fund. It has become a principal shareholder in the Big Three US automakers—GM, Ford and Chrysler—with a direct interest in increasing the exploitation of auto workers.

The UAW is now seizing on the closure of NUMMI to launch a chauvinist anti-Japanese campaign to boycott Toyota. At both the rally and on UAW Local 2244’s web site a Toyota logo has been prominently featured, morphed into a skull, under the headline, “Toyota stealing California jobs.”

The effort dovetails with the recall of Toyota vehicles over safety concerns. US auto companies have seized on the legitimate concerns of consumers in an attempt to boost sales for the Big Three, which have themselves been plagued by safety problems and recalls over the years.

The rally’s master of ceremonies was Art Pulaski, secretary treasurer of the California Labor Federation, which combines the state’s AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions. Pulaski—very conscious of the public relations purpose behind the rally—pranced around announcing speakers like a circus ringmaster, filling the interim periods with meaningless jargon and slogans such as: “Stop your plan to close us down, don’t be the bad guy in this town.”

The first speaker was Trumka, described by Pulaski as the “leader of the labor movement in the United States.” Trumka’s speech—which was delivered via

teleconference from his Washington, DC headquarters--centered on the boycott plan to “take a message to Toyota dealerships in California that Toyota kills American jobs.” Later in the meeting, this tactic was not even described as a boycott but “one of the most aggressive informational campaigns in history.”

Next was the California state treasurer, Democrat Bill Lockyer, an experienced representative of corporate America in California. Lockyer recently urged an immediate and deep attack on social programs critical for working Californians. He advised the California Legislative Counsel on behalf of the state’s well-heeled creditors saying, “My suggestion to you is don’t delay the pain. It’s going to be awful, but just get it done. It’s going to be worse if it doesn’t get done.”

Lockyer spoke of the need to protect “these vibrant middle class jobs.” He also adopted a stance of opposition to Toyota and the plant closure, calling on those in attendance to tell Toyota “we won’t stand for this.” Like Trumka, his speech was short on specifics and lasted only a few minutes.

Like the other speakers, Bob King said nothing about GM or the UAW’s own role in abandoning the workers, blaming only Toyota’s decision to close NUMMI. Seemingly oblivious to the immediate impact on the near 50,000 workers at NUMMI and its suppliers, King argued only that the plant closure would be bad for the environment because Toyota will have to ship the cars a longer distance to market. He declared the plant closure “a slap in the face to environmentalists” and closed with the same call for a boycott.

Teamsters Vice President Rome Aloise then took the stage advocating a more aggressive brand of nationalism. To the legislators present he suggested protectionist measures. As for the boycott, he adopted the tone of a high school football coach, saying, “You gotta be mad, your grandma needs to be mad and your kids need to be mad. You gotta go to those dealerships and put it in their face.” He closed saying, “We are gonna show you how to be mad” and “we gotta bring this fight to Japan!”

The UAW had the gall to drag out Javier Contreras, bargaining chairman of Local 2244, who was denounced by auto workers after shouting obscenities at them during an earlier union meeting. This was an effort to publicly rehabilitate him before the media in a

forum where actual NUMMI workers were a small minority. His portion of the rally presented more of the same hollow sloganeering with a dose of cynicism added, when he told the audience—with a straight face—of the importance of respecting NUMMI workers.

Anti-Japanese chauvinism has long been a stock-in-trade of the UAW, which in the 1970s and 1980s organized the smashing of Japanese cars. However, when it served its interests, the UAW embraced the NUMMI plant as a model for “labor-management partnership” and Japanese production methods, which were adopted in GM and throughout the auto industry.

The UAW is resorting to such poisonous nationalism in order to divide workers and subordinate them to the interests of the US based auto companies.

The rally underscores the need for NUMMI workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the UAW, to fight the closure of the plant, including preparations for a plant occupation to defend all jobs.



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