

UAW convention endorses policy of wage cuts, layoffs

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The United Auto Workers 35th constitutional convention concluding today in Detroit demonstrates once again that the UAW is an organization distant from and hostile to the rank-and-file auto workers.

This is an organization that has dedicated all of its efforts over the last three decades to suppressing the resistance of auto workers to ever more brutal exploitation by the auto companies. It long ago abandoned the strike weapon in practice, and last year agreed to binding arbitration and a ban on strikes at GM and Chrysler until 2015.

The convention was held under conditions of a catastrophic collapse in membership and decades of concessions and betrayed strikes, resulting in the destruction of virtually all the gains won by auto workers since the UAW was founded 75 years ago.

Last year, UAW membership fell by another 18 percent, plummeting to 355,191—the lowest level since the late 1930s, shortly after the fledgling union won recognition at General Motors. At its peak in 1979, the UAW had 1.5 million members.

Despite this miserable record, there was not the slightest hint at the convention of a change in leadership or policy. On the contrary, retiring UAW President Ron Gettelfinger—who oversaw the loss of nearly half the union's membership during his eight-year tenure—was hailed as a hero.

On Wednesday, delegates overwhelmingly voted to anoint Gettelfinger's hand-picked successor, Bob King, as the next president. The son of a former Ford industrial relations manager, King was booed on the factory floor and repudiated by more than 70 percent of the membership when he tried to push through concessions on behalf of Ford Motor Co. last year.

The predetermined elevation of King only underscored the bureaucratic, sclerotic and anti-democratic character of the UAW.

Thirty-five years ago, UAW conventions were still the venue for genuine disputes and debates. Among the delegates to such conventions could be counted militants influenced by left-wing politics. This week's convention was a stage-managed affair that excluded any input from the rank-and-file.

Even the demoralized efforts of loyal oppositionists in groups

like New Directions, Soldiers of Solidarity and Autoworkers Caravan to introduce mildly critical resolutions were shouted down and ruled out of order, and police were called to stop the distribution of their leaflets.

The UAW is not answerable to and does not represent workers. To call it a “union”—in the sense of a defensive organization of workers—is to conceal its real character and the *class* interests it represents. In reality, it is an organization of thousands of professional functionaries and aspiring entrepreneurs who, with the benefit of government sanction, serve as junior partners of the auto bosses.

They control a large number of shares of the auto companies and numerous joint investment funds, and an increasing portion of their income is directly dependent on the exploitation of the working class.

Anyone who wants to know the real character of the UAW has only to examine its annual financial report to the US Labor Department. The loss of tens of thousands of members and massive wage and benefit concessions hardly put it a dent in the UAW's assets, which fell slightly from \$1.2 billion in 2008 to \$1.13 billion last year.

The national headquarters disbursed \$96 million in salaries and benefits to its professional staffers in 2009. A cursory review of its list of employees reveals that at least 575 staffers made between \$85,000 and \$198,000.

This includes scores of vice presidents, regional directors, international servicing representatives, administrative assistants, organizers, attorneys, analysts and auditors bringing home more than \$125,000 each.

This is only part of the union apparatus. Thousands more draw ample salaries and expense accounts from union locals.

If the income of husbands and wives and other beneficiaries of nepotism is added up, the total per family can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. A recent lawsuit filed by UAW members with the Labor Department charged UAW Vice President Cal Rapson with stacking the staff of the UAW-GM Human Resources Center with friends, cronies and relatives.

In contrast to this gravy train for union officials, under the contract agreed to by the UAW, new workers at General Motors, Ford and Chrysler will be earning an annual gross income of \$28,000—slightly above the government's poverty

threshold for a family of four—before taxes and union dues are deducted.

The 1,200 functionaries gathered at Cobo Hall in downtown Detroit, only a short distance from some of the most impoverished urban neighborhoods in America. After decades of deindustrialization—aided and abetted by the betrayals of the UAW—thousands of former workers can be counted among the jobless in the city where real unemployment stands at the Depression level of 50 percent.

In his departing speech, Gettelfinger was oblivious to the destruction his policies had wrought. He spoke on behalf of his real constituency—the UAW apparatus—assuring them that he had taken measures to preserve their relations with the auto companies and the government, and secure their long-term interests, even as dues income plummeted. He noted, for example, that the UAW had imposed wage and benefit reductions on its own clerical and office staff.

“We chartered a course that led our great union down a path to survival,” Gettelfinger declared. The UAW, he said, was “leaner yes, but stronger, wiser and more determined as well.”

He thanked the Obama administration for utilizing the services of the UAW. “Without hesitation, President Barack Obama addressed the auto crisis and he took the necessary actions to prevent the collapse of the industry. Just over a year later the domestic auto industry is profitable and is making inroads in market share.”

In exchange for imposing unprecedented givebacks on UAW members and relieving the companies of billions in obligations for retiree health benefits, the White House handed the union millions of shares and a substantial ownership stake in GM and Chrysler. This has given the UAW apparatus and its Wall Street consultants a vested interest in continuing to collaborate with the auto companies to slash labor costs and gut retiree benefits to boost stock prices.

The upcoming sale of GM stock by the US government is expected to net billions in fees for the big financial houses and a handsome take for the UAW bureaucracy itself. Given the close relations Gettelfinger established with Wall Street and the auto companies during his tenure in office, it would come as no surprise if he personally benefited from the stock offering and the rebound in auto profits.

Such a state of affairs has long been in the making. The socialist and left-wing militants who led the sit-down strikes that established the UAW as a mass industrial union were driven out by UAW President Walter Reuther during the anti-communist purges of the 1940s and 1950s.

Having tied the union to the Democratic Party and a belief in the impregnable global position of American capitalism, the UAW responded to the challenge of Asian and European carmakers in the 1970s and 1980s by abandoning the class struggle and establishing a “partnership” with the auto companies. In the name of making the US-based corporations more competitive, the UAW sabotaged every struggle by

workers against plant closings, mass layoffs and concessions.

This culminated in the collaboration of the UAW with the Obama administration in last year’s forced bankruptcy and restructuring of GM and Chrysler, which resulted in the shutdown of dozens of factories, the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and unprecedented concessions. Over the next five years, labor costs at GM and Chrysler are expected to be lower than those of Japanese automakers operating non-union plants in the US, making it profitable for the US companies to build small cars domestically rather than in Mexico.

The effort by phony “left” groups, such as the International Socialist Organization and Workers World Party, and professional union dissidents to revive illusions in the UAW is both pathetic and reactionary. How much more proof does anyone need that the UAW is an anti-working class organization?

They continue to promote such illusions, however, as an instinctive reaction to defend the UAW apparatus against the growing hatred of rank-and-file auto workers. They are particularly frightened by the prospect of thousands of new workers being hired in at half the wages, who, far from accepting the authority of the UAW, will see it as nothing more than a police force for management to which they are forced to pay dues.

The precondition for auto workers to conduct a serious struggle in defense of jobs, working conditions and living standards is a break with the UAW and the building of new organizations of struggle independent of the pro-company UAW apparatus. The formation of new fighting organizations requires a rejection of the corporatism and economic nationalism of the UAW as well as its alliance with the Democratic Party, and a fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class based on a revival of the best internationalist and socialist traditions of the American working class.



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