

Struggle by Indianapolis GM workers raises crucial issues

Jerry White
27 August 2010

The World Socialist Web Site encourages workers in Indianapolis and auto workers throughout the country to write to the WSWs with their reactions, comments and experiences. These comments will be posted on the WSWs as part of an ongoing discussion on the necessary strategy to oppose the corporate-driven attack on the working class.

A year after the United Auto Workers union collaborated with the Obama administration in the restructuring of the auto industry and the assault on auto workers' wages and living standards, determined workers at the General Motors Indianapolis stamping plant have rebelled against the UAW and taken a stand to defend the right to a job and a decent wage.

On August 15, hundreds of workers shouted down UAW International officials and threw them out of their local union meeting for negotiating a cut in wages from \$29 an hour to \$15.50. The UAW International had secretly negotiated the deal with JD Norman, a 34-year-old ex-stockbroker, who said he would buy the plant and keep it open only if wages were cut in half. Last May, UAW Local 23 workers overwhelmingly voted to reject any negotiations with Norman, a decision that the UAW ignored.

Among workers there is a deep sense that the UAW International is running roughshod over their democratic rights and is motivated by the corrupt self-interest of the union bureaucracy. It has not escaped them that the UAW now owns a substantial piece of GM.

Even now, the UAW is conspiring with the media, state and local politicians, GM and JD Norman to organize another vote, claiming that only a "vocal minority" opposed the deal. A petition to this effect is circulating in the plant. Management is also reportedly hiring dozens of temporary workers—who already work for the lower wage—in hopes of browbeating them to vote for the deal.

In discussions with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Indianapolis workers have stressed that they want an organization that genuinely represents them, not the corporations. As one worker, put it, "We want to get rid of the corrupt officials and get people who are not ruined by money and politics."

Several important questions have arisen. Can the UAW be revived, or do workers need a new organization of struggle? Can UAW local unions serve as the voice of the rank and file in opposition to the International union?

Various UAW dissidents, including Gregg Shotwell, the founder of the Soldiers of Solidarity group, insist the UAW can be reformed. Commenting on the actions of the Indianapolis workers at the August 15 meeting, Shotwell said, "UAW Local 23 showed us all that rank and file members are the highest authority in the union."

Having faced the bullying and blackmail of the UAW bureaucracy, there is no doubt that workers feel they should be the "highest authority in the union." But wishful thinking is no substitute for a sober assessment of the real situation.

If, indeed, the rank and file were the "highest authority" in the union,

the question of a sale of the plant to JD Norman would have been settled with the May vote in the local and the workers' actions at the August 15 meeting. But the International does not accept the will of the workers and is relentlessly working to bypass it and impose the wage cut. And it has powers, under the UAW constitution, to do precisely that.

Can anyone seriously claim that the "will of the rank and file" is to liquidate all forms of independent shop floor representation, outlaw strikes, and accept plant closures, layoffs, wage and benefit cuts and speedup? But that is precisely the policy of the UAW. The organization adopted it officially in the 1980s, when it proclaimed the policy of the union to be one of corporatist labor-management "partnership."

While nearly a million auto workers have suffered the loss of their jobs and conditions in the factories have been driven back to those of the 1930s, this collaboration with management has guaranteed a steady stream of income for the UAW apparatus, which now sits on assets worth tens of billions of dollars.

The UAW is not susceptible to the democratic will of its members because it has very real, material economic interests that are based on betraying the needs of those same members.

With the VEBA trust the UAW now controls one of the biggest private investment funds in the US. Behind the US government it owns the biggest share of GM—17.5 percent—in addition to hundreds of millions of dollars in slush funds and real estate controlled by joint union-management ventures.

According to the US Labor Department, last year the UAW dispensed \$96 million in salaries to its staff of servicing reps, regional officers, organizers, etc. These are not people who work in factories. They have not suffered wage cuts or layoffs. They are men like Region 3 Director Maurice Davison, who pocketed \$150,233 last year, and UAW-GM Assistant Director Mike Grimes, who took in \$132,155.

Their concern is to maintain as high a level of dues-paying members as possible—on the basis of a policy that rules out any struggle against the auto bosses—regardless of the pay and working conditions of the workers. That is why they want the plant to be sold to Norman, who agrees to allow the UAW to continue to collect dues from their—much shrunken—paychecks.

The financial trough from which these officials feed now depends directly on the rise or fall in GM stock. They have a vested interest in helping GM boost its profits and the price of its stock through job cuts, wage and benefit reductions and speedup.

What social layer makes close to \$200,000 a year, does not actually work for an hourly wage, and benefits financially from the worsening of conditions of auto workers? Not the working class! The UAW officials are representatives of a particularly reactionary and parasitic section of the upper-middle class. The reality is that the so-called union embodies the interests of this social element, not that of the workers.

The clash between the Indianapolis workers and the UAW at the August 15 meeting was a conflict between irreconcilably opposed *class* interests.

That is why workers face, in the form of the UAW, an enemy no less implacable and vicious than the corporate owners. The UAW will stop at nothing to impose the wage cuts in Indianapolis because it has a direct financial interest in doing so.

There are urgent practical as well as fundamental political conclusions that flow from this reality. Workers at the stamping plant need immediately to elect a rank-and-file action committee, independent of the UAW and made up of the most trusted and militant workers, to stop the UAW from ramming through the concessions in another vote.

Meetings must be held to unify workers in the entire factory—higher and lower seniority, temporary and regular workers, etc.—in a common fight to stop the wage cuts, prevent the closing of the plant and defend the jobs and living standards of all workers.

This means reviving the methods of the class struggle, which were carried out by auto workers in Anderson and Flint in the 1930s, when they occupied GM's plants. Such an action would win the immediate support of workers and young people throughout the region, the entire country and internationally. At the same time, appeals must be made to all auto workers to prepare a national strike to overturn the concessions imposed by the UAW and the Obama administration last year.

UAW locals vs. the International

Such a struggle requires a complete break with the UAW. The locals have no real independence from the International, and in the rare cases where locals have defied the UAW, they have been taken over by Solidarity House and broken up. The International is explicitly guaranteed such powers by the UAW constitution, which states in Article 12, Section 3:

“Where necessary to: (b) assure the performance of collective bargaining agreements or other duties as a bargaining representative, or (d) otherwise assure carrying out the legitimate objectives of this International Union by such subordinate body, the International Executive Board by a two-thirds vote of the entire Executive Board may, after a hearing, reorganize or disband the chartered subordinate body, revoke the charter, suspend any officer or officers from office and/or take over supervision of the chartered subordinate body until its affairs have been properly adjusted. In such event, the Board shall designate one of its members as administrator who shall have full authority over and supervision of all functions of the Local Union...”

Over the last period, two of the most notorious cases where this occurred involved Accuride workers in Henderson, Kentucky and Freightliner truck workers in Cleveland, North Carolina.

In February 1998, 425 workers, members of UAW Local 2036, walked out at Accuride—a steel wheel supplier for Ford and other truck manufacturers—against the scrapping of seniority, skilled trade positions, grievance procedures and all limits on subcontracting. A month later workers voted to return to work—while rejecting management's demands—and were locked out.

When the UAW announced it would cut off strike benefits if workers did not accept the company's demands, the local issued protests on the Internet, leafleted a Ford plant and picketed the union's Detroit headquarters. In response, the International removed the local president and put an administrator in charge of the local and negotiations. In 2002, with workers still refusing to cave in, the UAW cut off strike benefits and pulled the local's charter, ending twenty years of UAW representation at the plant.

In 2007, the UAW International removed the entire bargaining committee of UAW Local 3520 and got Freightliner to fire them for

leading an “unauthorized strike.” The walkout—against wage and benefit concessions to which the International had secretly agreed—was called after members authorized a strike by a 98.4 percent margin.

UAW officials came in to crush the strike, and after failing to get workers to accept concessions, circulated petitions along with management for another vote. Using the threat of layoffs, the contract was pushed through in a second ballot.

Following the strike, five bargaining committee members were brought up on charges of “behavior unbecoming of a union member.” While the local trial committee acquitted them, they have never regained their jobs.

What is the UAW?

The UAW is a union in name only. It does not carry out any of the functions traditionally associated with unions: resolving grievances, protecting jobs, working conditions and wage and benefit levels. On the contrary, it bans strikes, victimizes militant workers and imposes management's demands for speedup, wage-cutting and downsizing.

Such an organization—which functions as a tool of the corporations and the government—cannot be democratized or reformed. It must be broken with and new organizations of working class struggle built.

There is nothing impossible or unthinkable about workers breaking with organizations that have betrayed them. There would never have been a UAW if workers in the 1930s had not rebelled against the old American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions and built the mass industrial unions of the CIO. This involved a civil war against the company stooges in the AFL, who did everything to sabotage the struggles of the newly organized workers.

The degeneration of the UAW flowed from its defense of capitalism, its alliance with the Democratic Party, and its post-war purge of socialists and left-wing militants. This left workers with no means to defend their interests as American capitalism began its long decline in the 1970s and 1980s, and the corporations sought to overcome their declining profits and market share by shifting production to low-wage countries.

Today, the question is not simply one of building new trade unions. What is needed is a mass political party of the working class—completely free from the control of the two big business parties—that has as its aim breaking the grip of the corporate and financial elite and reorganizing economic life to meet the needs of the working people. This means replacing the capitalist profit system with socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact