

UAW's Bob King offers up auto workers as fodder for exploitation

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United Auto Workers President Bob King, in a speech to an industry gathering Monday in Traverse City, Michigan, announced that the union was “ready, willing and able to do what it takes” to make the auto firms successful.

The UAW's new chief, installed at the organization's convention in June, didn't care to spell out what he had in mind, except in general terms, but the thrust of his presentation was that the UAW leadership would be open to any “innovative” proposals by the companies as long as the union retained and, if possible, expanded its dues-paying base.

What lie ahead for auto workers if King has his way are poverty wages, a more brutal work place and a return to conditions that haven't been seen in American industry since the early 1930s. The UAW is offering up auto workers as pure and simple fodder for exploitation.

King began his speech to the Center for Automotive Research conference by noting what an “honor” it was to address “my colleagues in the auto industry,” i.e., the multimillionaire owners of the auto and auto parts companies, and pronouncing himself “deeply grateful to the Obama administration and the American people for saving the American auto industry.”

The Obama administration in 2009 forced General Motors and Chrysler into bankruptcy, demanding more drastic wage reductions (50 percent for new hires) than the companies' and presiding over the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs.

In his opening remarks, the UAW chief claimed that “Everyone made enormous sacrifices to emerge from this crisis.” This is a lie. How many auto executives lost their homes? How many union officials saw their pay cut in half?

King undercut his own argument, noting that “UAW members took wage cuts of \$7,000 to \$30,000 a year.” He continued: “Benefits were also reduced significantly. Restructuring resulted in the loss of nearly 200,000 jobs.” He ended his thought there, because, in fact, no one made sacrifices *except* auto workers.

“The UAW of the 21st century must be fundamentally and radically different from the UAW of the 20th century,” he declared. “This is a new world, and we must reinvent our union with bold new strategies.”

In fact, the UAW spent the last two decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the current one partnering with

the bosses and giving back what auto workers had fought and died for in an earlier period.

King observed that globalization had put an end to the “20th-century UAW.” He continued, “The 21st-century UAW recognizes that flexibility, innovation, lean manufacturing and continuous cost improvement are paramount in the global marketplace.”

The UAW chief emphasized, so that no one in his audience would misunderstand him, that the union no longer saw its role as defending workers, but rather as facilitating their exploitation: “The 20th-century UAW fell into a pattern with our employers where we saw each other as adversaries rather than partners. Mistrust became embedded in our relations, and as a result we signed onto ever more lengthy and complicated contracts with work rules and narrow job classifications that hindered flexibility, hindered the full use of the talents of our members and promoted a litigious and time-consuming grievance culture.”

The UAW contract used to mean something. Militant auto workers carried it with them, consulted it and stood up to management in defense of their hard-fought rights and gains. To King and his well-heeled ilk, such considerations are merely complicated, litigious and time-consuming. As he said, “The 21st-century UAW no longer views these managements as our adversaries or enemies, but as partners in innovation and quality. Our new relationships with these employers are built upon a foundation of respect, shared goals, and a common mission.”

King explained that the UAW played a valuable role for the companies under conditions of turmoil in the industry. The union, he said, had taken “a strong proactive role in making sure that quality did not suffer from the workforce reductions and churning.”

In other words, the UAW made sure that while tens of thousands lost their jobs and entire communities were devastated, the company's operations—and profits—were protected from disruption.

The UAW has gone from a membership of 1.5 million in 1979 to 355,000 at the end of 2009. Its assets have fallen only slightly, and a horde of bureaucratic parasites in “Solidarity House” in Detroit make as much or more than they ever did.

Although the UAW is remote from and hostile toward rank-and-file auto workers, it cannot be indifferent to the shrinkage of its membership. As part of King's "innovative" program of even greater subservience to the auto firms, he sought to convince his audience about the benefits of unionization from the point of view of big business.

King urged employers "to re-examine their instinctive resistance to the notion of unionization, and consider some of the advantages of a positive, productive relationship with a union. Unions can and should play a positive role—and the results show the UAW is doing exactly that."

He further suggested that unions played an important role in maintaining social order, observing that "corporate actions left unchecked by a free press or by free unions can result in corporate domination of the political process and massive, destabilizing divisions between rich and poor."

King's "innovative" organizing strategy involves the UAW drawing up a "a set of guidelines called the UAW Principles for Fair Union Elections," which include requirements such as equal access to employees and prohibition of derogatory or "untruthful statements about the other party." The union plans to present its guidelines to the executives of the nonunion auto companies. If the latter reject them, the union plans to organize protests. King asserted, "We will expose those companies in any and every way we can until they agree to respect workers' rights and to rectify their anti-union actions."

Spokesmen for the Japanese-owned companies expressed no interest in the UAW's principles. The UAW has been unable to organize workers at Toyota and Nissan primarily because of its own decades-long record of betrayals. Reasonably enough, workers at these companies see no reason why they should sign up for conditions and wages no better, and perhaps even worse, than those they have at present, with the added privilege of paying the UAW a hefty sum in dues.

Moreover, as his speech made clear, King's guidelines are merely a cover for the UAW's real bargaining stance with the transplants, which is to argue that they will be better able to exploit their workers with the union than without it.

King compared his miserable efforts to maneuver the union into the transplants with the heroic sit-down strikers of the 1930s. Speaking of the Employee Free Choice Act, a bill pushed by the AFL-CIO that would make it easier for unions to organize and which is stalled in Congress, the UAW president remarked, according to the *Detroit News* (the comment is not in the text of the speech on the UAW web site): "Just like the Flint sit-down strikers [in 1936] didn't wait on the law,' the UAW will adopt another strategy... The sit-down strikers 'did what was necessary to get fairness and justice,' King said, 'and we will do the same.'"

The comparison is both absurd and obscene. The sit-down strikers occupied factories and faced down police and troops in order to drive out the company unions and end the tyranny of the auto bosses. King is for the total suppression of the class

struggle and the reincarnation of the company union in the form of today's UAW.

King's address was well received in the business press. The *Detroit News* called it "a potential watershed speech," and cited the comment of a labor professor at the University of California who termed it "striking in tone and a bold departure from the past."

Tom Walsh, the business columnist of the *Detroit Free Press*, told his readers that King had declared "an end to adversarial relations" and asserted the "moral obligation" to "build the best vehicles at the best price." There were "no diatribes against greedy overpaid CEOs," Walsh noted.

Meanwhile, by all accounts, tensions are rising in the auto plants, where new-hires earn \$14 an hour. An Associated Press story in June noted that at the GM plant near Lansing, Michigan, "workers drive hundreds of Buick Enclaves...off the assembly line.

"Driving one home would be tough for the plant's newest workers, whose annual pay is less than the \$35,000 it costs to buy even the cheapest Enclave."

The Associated Press pointed out that new-hires in the UAW now make 20 percent less than the average US manufacturing worker. "Demands for cuts are still coming," it reported. "Workers at Nexteer Automotive, a steering plant in Saginaw, Mich., that GM is trying to sell, were asked to freeze wages for five years, lower the entry-level wage to \$12 per hour and remove family members from new workers' health-care plans." Workers voted down the concessions in June.

A 23-year veteran at the Lansing plant told AP that "workers are the angriest he has ever seen."

King's address reflects the complete transformation of the UAW into a corporatist appendage of big business. That a union president could deliver such an address, devoid of the slightest hint of class-consciousness, testifies to the anti-working class character of the organization.

The UAW is still considered by some a "workers organization." It is not. It is a bureaucratic shell catering to the interests of its upper-middle-class officialdom, which happens still to hold several hundred thousand workers hostage.



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