

UAW backers offer no strategy for Indianapolis struggle

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Workers at GM's Indianapolis stamping plant are entering a new stage of struggle after defeating the latest effort to push through a 50 percent wage cut over the opposition of the factory's 650 workers. According to a count of mail-in ballots, workers voted by an overwhelming margin of 457 to 96 to oppose the wage cut deal signed between the United Auto Workers and former stockbroker JD Norman, with the support of GM.

The vote shows the determined resistance of workers to concessions. The question now posed is: which way forward? A rally organized on Saturday by officials in the local and allies among "dissident" factions of the UAW attracted about 75 workers who were seeking to express their opposition to the concessions. The organizers of the rally, however, presented no strategy for carrying out a struggle. They insisted that all opposition must remain within the confines of the UAW, which is working actively against the interests of the workers.

The UAW, which controls a significant ownership stake in GM, is no doubt planning new ways to ram through the wage cut or simply allow the plant to close as an object lesson to other auto workers. The rejection of the deal means that GM will proceed with plans to remove machinery and close the plant, UAW Region 3 Director Maurice Davison told the *Indianapolis Star* Monday.

Workers at the factory established the GM Stamping Rank-and-File Committee earlier this month to unite auto workers, independently of and in opposition to the UAW, to fight the wage cut and plant closure. Their effort to break the stranglehold of the UAW has generated widespread support and letters of solidarity have poured into the committee from workers throughout the US and many other countries (see: "Letters on the Indianapolis rank-and-file committee").

The emergence of the committee has generated deep concern in the UAW apparatus, which fears that management and the government will no longer value its role as an industrial police force if it cannot control the rank-and-file and impose the corporation's dictates.

In recent years, there have been growing signs of rebellion against the UAW, from opposition to wage-cutting deals with Delphi in 2005, to the "transformational agreements" with the Detroit automakers in 2007 and the bitter three-month strike of

American Axle workers in 2008, which was isolated and defeated by the UAW. There was huge opposition to the concessions imposed as part of the Obama administration's forced bankruptcies and restructuring of GM and Chrysler, and Ford workers defeated UAW concessions by a 70 percent margin.

Under these conditions a host of local officials, and their supporters from organizations such as Labor Notes and the International Socialist Organization, have emerged as the last line of defense for the apparatus, seeking to prevent any break with the UAW.

In many cases, the ex-radicals have a direct material interest in defending the UAW. Many have been put on the payroll as organizers, local union officials and spokesmen. They are not genuine socialists—fighting for the working class to break with the two big business parties and put an end to capitalism. Their support for the UAW is bound up with their pro-Democratic Party politics, which do not in any significant way differ from those of UAW International President Bob King.

This was demonstrated in Saturday's "Stand on Solidarity" rally organized in Indianapolis by officials from UAW Local 23. Among those speaking at the demonstration were Greg Shotwell, founder of the Soldiers of Solidarity group, and Wendy Thompson, the former UAW Local 235 president at American Axle's plant in Detroit and a supporter of the Labor Notes group.

The speakers did not outline any strategy to mobilize workers against the threat to close the plant. No conclusions were drawn about the three-decade long betrayals of the UAW. No one drew any connection between the struggle of the Indianapolis workers and the assault on workers' jobs and living standards throughout the US and internationally. There was no mention of the role of the Obama administration or the efforts of Indiana's Republican governor and Democratic congressmen to force stamping workers to accept the wage cut.

The rally was not aimed at warning workers about what to expect and preparing them for struggle. Instead it was aimed at lulling them to sleep with vague slogans about solidarity and illusions in this or that local union official who was supposedly going to make the UAW fight.

The tone for the rally was set in a leaflet that urged workers

to remind “our International leaders” that they had to answer to the membership. It expressed shock and disappointment that Region 3 Director Maurice Davison—a company stooge for GM who makes over \$150,000 a year—should tell workers to accept a 50 percent wage cut instead behaving like “someone who we pay to protect our wages and benefits.”

The hostility of these officials to auto workers was summed up by Wendy Thompson. She praised the Local 23 leadership, saying, “You are a local the way a local is supposed to be.” Then she continued, “The International needs to explain why they aren’t supporting you”—downplaying the fact that the UAW far from “not supporting” the workers was leading the assault against them on behalf of the auto bosses.

Thompson then blamed rank-and-file workers for the defeats inflicted on them by the UAW. “Do you remember the American Axle strike? Our membership made a serious mistake. They thought they had a way to win that strike, and it was smashed and it didn’t have to be.”

But who “smashed” the strike? It was not, as Thompson suggests, the 3,650 workers in Michigan and New York who walked the picket lines for three months defying the threat of plant closings, the use of scabs, arrests and police threats. It was the UAW, which starved workers on \$200-a-week strike benefits, despite a nearly \$1 billion strike fund. The union worked day in and day out to defeat the struggle and pave the way for the concessions it would hand over to GM, Ford and Chrysler in 2009.

In isolating the American Axle workers, the UAW had the key support of Thompson, who upheld the authority of the UAW and opposed the formation of rank-and-file committees to break the isolation of the strike and reach out to mobilize all auto workers in a common struggle. In the end, she was complicit in the smashing of the strike, which led to thousands losing their jobs, the shutdown of the Detroit plant and sweeping wage and benefit concessions.

Greg Shotwell, a former local union official at UAW 1753 in western Michigan, played a similar role in dissipating anger against the UAW as it collaborated in the destruction of workers’ jobs and wages at Delphi. Again opposing any break with the UAW, he had nothing to offer workers outside of “work-to-rule” protests, supposedly to persuade the UAW to fight. These policies have left a wreckage of plant closings and destroyed living standards.

At the demonstration, Shotwell repeated the refrain that “the highest authority of the union is the membership. We are the leaders,” he said. These words were intended to obscure the completely undemocratic character of the UAW, which does not speak for workers, but for a privileged layer that profits off of the exploitation of the workers.

In the months leading up to last year’s forced restructuring of GM and Chrysler, Thompson and another speaker at the rally, retired International Representative Frank Hammer, were leading figures in the Auto Workers Caravan to Congress,

where they promoted the lie that the Obama administration and various Democratic Party politicians would side with the workers. Instead, the president and the Wall Street investors on the White House Auto Task Force wiped out tens of thousands of jobs and imposed poverty wages on auto workers. In exchange for its collaboration, the UAW was given billions in corporate shares.

UAW Local 23 Shop Chairman Greg Clark offered no strategy. Instead, he is asking the National Labor Relations Board—a government agency that consistently serves corporate interests—to pressure the UAW International to back off on its wage-cutting demands. He has claimed that the shutdown of the factory is preferable, arguing that workers could be transferred to other plants. However, the closure of the plant would be no victory and instead would be used as an example to blackmail other workers into giving concessions.

In opposition to this, the GM Stamping Rank-and-File Committee is fighting to mobilize the broadest support among auto workers in Indiana and across the country to stop the plant closings and wage cuts. It is making a direct appeal to other GM workers, along with Ford workers in Indianapolis who are facing mass layoffs and a plant closing. Such a struggle is only possible by breaking with the UAW and organizing rank-and-file committees in every factory to wage a common struggle.

Commenting on the rally, a member of the GM Stamping Rank-and-File Committee said, “We thought we would hear the bigger picture. But all we heard was just keep saying ‘no’ to the concessions. That’s their whole strategy. No one was willing to go further than that. We’ve been getting letters from all over the world, from South Africa, Ireland, Australia. None of the speakers would say why these workers would be interested in what was happening in Indianapolis. It’s because they are facing the same thing.”

The workers who did attend expressed support for continuing the struggle. A worker from GM’s stamping plant in nearby Marion, Indiana, said, “I was in Lansing when they shut down the Oldsmobile line and came here. Now they want to shut Indianapolis down. It’s time to take a stand.”



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