Growing workers' rebellion against the UAW

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There is a growing rebellion by rank-and-file workers in the US against the United Auto Workers union. In recent weeks, workers at the GM stamping plant in Indianapolis overwhelming voted down a 50 percent wage cut pushed by the UAW. Workers at the Lake Orion GM plant in suburban Detroit have expressed angry opposition to an agreement by the UAW to halve their wages without even allowing a ratification vote.

Workers in Indianapolis formed the GM Stamping Rank-and-File Committee and have called on workers to follow their example by building committees of action independently of and in opposition to the UAW to organize a fight to defend jobs and overturn the two-tier wage structure imposed last year by the UAW and the Obama administration.

The formation of the rank-and-file committee has struck a deep chord among workers in the US and internationally who have experienced similar betrayals at the hands of the pro-company and pro-government unions.

This rebellion has generated considerable concern in the corporate and media establishment, which fears that the UAW is losing its grip on the workers. "Upset union workers are citing the Orion plant as another example of how top union leaders aren't representing their interests," the Detroit Free Press wrote in a recent front-page article. "Contract rejections by Ford workers last year and at a GM stamping plant in Indianapolis last week show workers aren't afraid to break with leadership."

In a Detroit News comment, syndicated columnist Dan Calabrese told his readers to consult the World Socialist Web Site for an indication of how the majority of auto workers think. "According to the WSWS," he wrote, "it's the UAW that is using dirty tricks and intimidation to force the poor, beleaguered workers into subjection to The Man."

UAW President Bob King, Calabrese added sarcastically—yet entirely accurately—is nothing but a "right-wing, capitalist stooge!"

The Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site fully support the movement of workers against the UAW. It is not a question of reforming this thoroughly bureaucratic and anti-democratic organization, which decades ago integrated itself into the structure of corporate management and abandoned any defense of its members.

The issue posed to auto workers is the building of new, democratic organizations of struggle independent of and in opposition to the UAW. The GM Stamping Rank-and-File Committee in Indianapolis is an important beginning and should be taken as an example for workers at Lake Orion and all other auto plants.

A host of former and current UAW officials, including Soldiers of Solidarity founder Greg Shotwell, and their supporters from the Labor Notes publication and phony "left" organizations such as the International Socialist Organization, insist that workers must not break with the UAW. For them, no struggles are permissible or legitimate unless they remain within the structures of the UAW.

This is a sure-fire formula for still more defeats of the workers, as these people know full well. Some of them talk of "reforming" the UAW, "reclaiming" it, etc. This is a fraud.

In the first place, the workers have no institutional means by which to impose their will on the UAW bureaucracy. The union constitution, which some hold up as a model of democracy, is the product of the anti-socialist witch-hunts of the 1940s and 1950s which purged the most militant and principled workers from the union. It gives the national leadership the power to seize control or close down any local that disobeys its dictates, and throw out the local leaders.

The union bureaucracy functions as a law unto itself, entirely unaccountable to the rank and file, which is why is has been able to preside over the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, scores of plant closures and the gutting of wages, working conditions and benefits. The fact that it has imposed a 50 percent wage cut at Lake Orion without even a vote by the workers demonstrates the dictatorial character of the organization.

In any event, a genuine effort to reform the UAW would have to begin with a rank-and-file rebellion to throw out the scabs who control the organization. By its very logic, such a struggle, to which the union would respond with thuggery and repression, would lead to a break with the organization. But those who are telling workers to work within the union

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are proposing nothing of the kind. They are not interested in reforming the union, but rather in protecting the bureaucracy from the workers and obtaining positions for themselves within the apparatus.

Typical of the line of these stooges of Solidarity House is a comment on the Lake Orion situation by Shotwell in which he urges the workers to appeal to the UAW officials, saying, “They need a reminder that their first obligation is to their Membership and their own Constitution.”

Anyone who claims, after all that has happened not only over the past year, but the past 30 years, that UAW officials are susceptible to reminders from the workers about their “obligations” to the rank and file are either deluding themselves or deliberately seeking to delude others.

The UAW and its army of functionaries have long served not the workers, but the companies and the government. That is how the thousands of servicing reps, regional directors, local officers and other UAW functionaries earn their six-figure salaries and other perks. With a substantial ownership stake in the Detroit automakers, the UAW executives have a direct financial incentive to impoverish their own members.

There is nothing “militant” or “dissident” about Shotwell, Labor Notes & Co. They do not call for any militant actions—strikes, factory occupations—to fight the attacks on wages, benefits and jobs. Instead, they preach resignation and obedience to the UAW bureaucracy, which they dutifully serve.

Their support for the UAW goes hand in hand with their subservience to the Democratic Party and the capitalist system it defends. They promote the shopworn lie that the Democratic Party is a party of the “people” and portray it as a benefactor of the working class.

History shows that every gain won by American workers was the result of militant struggles in opposition to the corporate establishment and both big business parties. The very right to have a union, as well as the eight-hour day, child labor laws, overtime pay, health benefits, etc., were won in often bloody struggles against the violent resistance of the employers and the government. Whenever the Democrats, under the threat of revolution, made concessions to workers’ demands, they did so to smother the social movement so they could claw back the workers’ gains at a later point.

Today, the result of the subordination of the working class, via the unions, to the Democratic Party is clear—a return to poverty and sweatshop exploitation.

American workers made gains by taking the initiative in rebellion against all the defenders of the status quo. This was the case in the 1930s, when socialist and left-wing militants led the break with the AFL craft unions to form the UAW.

The program of these first pioneers—who led the 1934-35 Auto-Lite and Chevrolet strikes in Toledo, Ohio—reads like an indictment of the UAW today. They denounced compulsory arbitration and no-strike agreements, and insisted that workers should put “no trust in governmental boards and agencies … which without exception, aid only the employers.” The founding convention of the UAW in 1935 called for a break with the Democrats and the building of a national labor party.

But the leaders of the CIO, including John L. Lewis and Walter Reuther, tied the newly born industrial unions to Roosevelt and the Democrats, and to the domestic and international interests of American capitalism. They abandoned any struggle for industrial democracy or the radical restructuring of the US economy and led a purge of the socialist and left-wing militants who had built the union.

This left the working class defenseless in the face of a counteroffensive by corporate America in the late 1970s and 1980s. Having tied the fate of the working class to the health of American capitalism, the UAW openly collaborated with the employers and the big business politicians to downsize the industry and slash labor costs, leading to the destruction of one million auto workers' jobs over the last three decades.

The UAW and the rest of the unions can no longer be described as “workers organizations” since they fail to meet the basic criterion: to defend the interests of workers.

The growing opposition among auto workers in the US is one expression of an emerging movement of the working class all around the world. Everywhere, workers are being told that they must give up, that they must sacrifice, even as the bankers and corporate executives that created the crisis are doing better than ever.

The fight for the right to a job, to a livable income, to health care and a decent retirement brings auto workers into ever more direct conflict with an economic system dictated by the profit interests of a tiny layer of the population.

The first step in the fight for these rights must be the establishment of genuine organizations of working class struggle, rank-and-file action committees, entirely independent of the corporations, the two big business parties, and their lackeys in the UAW.

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