

The UAW and “21st Century industrial relations”

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Five years into the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, American workers, like their counterparts throughout the world, are facing unprecedented conditions of social misery and exploitation.

The share of the national income going to labor has fallen to the smallest level since World War II, productivity has shot up by 25 percent since 2000 and real wages have fallen six percent, the sharpest five-year fall since the 1920s. Meanwhile, corporate profits have hit the highest proportion of the GDP in the post-war period, the stock market is at record levels and the richest one percent of the population has grabbed 95 percent of all income gains since the so-called recovery began.

In the face of this, the AFL-CIO and other trade unions, which claim to represent American workers, have not organized a single mass protest or industrial action to defend the working class. On the contrary, the unions have fully supported the cost-cutting drive of corporate America and the Obama administration.

The outlook of the highly paid executives who run the trade unions was summed up in the comments by United Auto Workers President Bob King, which were published in the *Detroit News* last week under the headline, “UAW President King out to forge unions as ally, not adversary, of carmakers.”

“It’s really important that people understand the global economy and understand the competitive pressures on the companies,” King told the newspaper. “Having a confrontational relationship in a global economy would be counterproductive for our membership...Helping companies grow their business, helping the companies be more profitable—all that helps our members.”

Helping the companies become profitable certainly has had its rewards for King and the rest of the UAW

bureaucracy. They have profited handsomely from running what can only be described as an industrial police force. It has had no such benefits for auto workers, who are now laboring under conditions that in many respects resemble those that prevailed when Ford first introduced the assembly line into his factories 100 years ago.

Under the 2009 deal worked out between the UAW, the automakers and the Obama administration to restructure GM and Chrysler, the eight-hour day has been abolished, and workers regularly labor 10-12 hours with no overtime. After agreeing to a 50 percent cut in wages for new hires, thousands of young workers now make the equivalent, in real terms, of the five-dollar-a-day wage their great-grandfathers earned at Ford’s Model T plant in 1913.

There is no job security, and thousands can be tossed back into the streets once sales fall. Even the rotten contracts signed by the UAW can be reopened at any time behind the backs of union members. As King told the *News*, “Waiting between contracts in today’s world leaves you missing opportunities” for even more cost cutting.

By reducing labor costs for the Detroit automakers by 27 percent over the last six years, the UAW has earned the praise of top auto and White House officials. The *News* cites the plaudits of General Motors CEO Dan Akerson, who says he dines with King every month “to discuss issues both large and small” and invites him to address GM’s Board of Directors.

“Our relationship has been one of constructive engagement—a business partnership underpinned by what has become a good friendship on a personal level. It’s a blueprint for how 21st-century industrial relations have to be,” Akerson said.

Having seen its membership decline from 1.53

million in 1979 to less than 400,000 today, the UAW is now seeking the support of German automaker Volkswagen to recruit new dues-paying members in the southern US states where the UAW has been unable, given its long record of betrayals, to win any union recognition votes at European- and Asian-owned transplants.

The UAW is appealing to VW to set up a “works council” at its plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, along the lines of the “co-determination” schemes operated by the IG Metall union at VW’s German plants. Such bodies would be company unions—and therefore illegal—under US labor law without the presence of a US-based union nominally independent of the company. The UAW hopes the setting up of such a council by VW would enable it to gain recognition—and millions in dues payments—without the Chattanooga workers ever holding a vote.

The transformation of the UAW into an industrial police force for management is the culmination of decades of degeneration, beginning with the anti-communist witch-hunts by the UAW bureaucracy during the 1940s and 1950s. These purges drove out the socialist pioneers who led mass struggles that founded the UAW in the 1930s.

Having been consolidated on the basis of the defense of capitalism, economic nationalism and support for the Democratic Party, the UAW and other unions moved sharply to the right as American capitalism suffered an historic decline in its world position and the ruling elite abandoned its postwar policy of class compromise and shifted to class warfare in the 1980s.

In the name of boosting US “competitiveness” and corporate profits, the UAW and other unions have spent the last three and half decades suppressing every form of the class struggle. The same process has taken place in every part of the world, as the recent role of the IG Metall in the suppression of opposition to the shutdown of the GM-Opel plant in Bochum, Germany and other European auto plants demonstrates.

The trade unions are not “workers organizations” as claimed by various pseudo-left groups, like the International Socialist Organization, which insist that no challenge to the unions’ authority over the working class is permissible. The trade unions speak not for the working class, but for an affluent layer of union executives whose upper middle class incomes and

lifestyles depend on increasing the exploitation of the workers they supposedly represent.

In the midst of the ongoing assault on workers in Detroit—with an unelected emergency manager using the bankruptcy courts to gut the jobs and pensions of workers, and sell off the publicly owned assets including the cultural treasures of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA)—King and other UAW executives have been haggling with Chrysler-Fiat management over the value of the billions of dollars in shares, which are owned by the UAW-controlled retiree health care trust fund. The sale of the stocks in an IPO next year seems sure to make King and his fellow union executives very rich men.

The demonstration held by the Socialist Equality Party last week to oppose the selloff of the artwork of the DIA—the first expression of working class opposition to the Detroit bankruptcy—points the way forward for the entire working class.

The rebuilding of a genuine labor movement will require a rebellion by the working class against the UAW and other anti-labor organizations, a political break with the Democratic Party and the revival of the powerful socialist traditions of the American and international working class.



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