Auto workers reject UAW at Tennessee VW plant

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In a devastating defeat for the United Auto Workers union, workers at Volkswagen's Chattanooga, Tennessee plant voted against the UAW last week. With nearly 90 percent of the workers casting ballots, the UAW lost the certification vote by 712 to 626.

The debacle left UAW President Bob King and other union officials stunned. UAW executives had spent millions of dollars on the campaign and were counting on the backing of VW management, which agreed to work with the UAW to set up a German-style "works council" at the plant.

Predictably, UAW officials blamed the defeat on right-wing Republican politicians and the supposedly "antiunion" sentiment of workers themselves. In fact, Chattanooga workers voted "no" because they correctly saw that the UAW would function as nothing more than a company union. UAW leaders like President Bob King and Region 8 Director Gary Casteel made it clear that the UAW would do nothing to address workers' grievances over low pay, the increased use of casual labor and poor working conditions. On the contrary, UAW officials made it clear that they would keep wages low and productivity up—and subtract union dues from workers' paychecks to boot.

Before the vote, workers became aware of a clause in the Volkswagen-UAW "neutrality agreement" promising the automaker the union would engage in "maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages that [Volkswagen] enjoys relative to its competitors in the United States and North America."

In other words, the UAW told Volkswagen it would keep wages "competitive" with the Detroit-based automakers. The Chattanooga workers could only take this as a threat; full-time workers hired at the Volkswagen plant in 2011 earn about $5 more per hour than their counterparts at General Motors, Ford and Chrysler who were hired over the last six years.

Workers at the Tennessee factory—many of whom worked in northern plants before—know full well that the UAW has overseen the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, the closing of hundreds of factories and the abandonment of virtually every gain won by auto workers.

Under the 2009 deal worked out between the UAW, the automakers and the Obama administration to restructure the US auto industry, the eight-hour day has been abolished, and workers regularly labor 10-12 hours with no overtime pay. After agreeing to a 50 percent cut in wages for new hires, thousands of young workers now make the equivalent, in real terms, of what auto workers earned one hundred years ago.

The UAW used labor costs at the nonunion "transplants" in the South as the benchmark for reducing the wages and benefits of workers at the Detroit's Big Three automakers, which have reduced labor costs by nearly 30 percent over the last six years. This has allowed the UAW to pitch itself as a cost-cutter to the European and Asian-owned automakers.

According to one media account, Frank Fischer, CEO of Volkswagen Chattanooga, "seemed saddened by the outcome," which was announced at a joint VW-UAW press conference last Friday night. Basing itself on its successful collusion with the IG Metall in Germany, VW sees setting up a works council in Tennessee as an essential device for suppressing opposition and imposing its dictates behind the façade of "co-determination."

In order to do this, however, VW needs the UAW because a workers council—which is committed solely to the interests of the company—would be illegal under US labor law, unless workers at the factory were

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represented by an ostensibly “independent union.”

King first sought to get VW to certify the union without workers voting at all, claiming a majority had already signed cards in favor of the UAW. Officials from IG Metall, which has seats on the company’s supervisory board, sought to bully workers into voting for the UAW by suggesting their jobs depended on bringing a works council into the Tennessee plant.

In explaining the clause contained in the “neutrality agreement,” UAW head Bob King released a statement summing up the organization’s corporatist outlook, “Our philosophy,” he said, “is every company that we work with, we’re concerned about competitiveness. We work together with companies to have the highest quality, the highest productivity… What I hope the American public understands is that those people who attack this are attacking labor-management cooperation. They don’t believe in workers and management working together.”

This is nothing but a company union. Since the Great Depression US labor law has prohibited such organizations, identifying them as, in essence, another layer of management organically hostile to the workers they falsely claim to represent. It was then understood that such organizations could have no other purpose than policing the workforce.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the US automakers used company unions as a bulwark against organizations that sought to articulate workers’ interests—i.e., real unions, including at one time the UAW. The longstanding prohibition of company unions, established with the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, is based on the tacit admission that workers and bosses have a different set of interests. As King’s statement makes clear, the UAW denies this elementary principle.

As a result of decades of betrayals, UAW membership has fallen from 1.5 million in 1979 to 380,000 today. The latest defeat in the South, combined with the anticipated loss of millions in income once dues payments become voluntary for auto workers under Michigan’s right-to-work law next year, could lead to the complete collapse of this rotten organization.

This threat to the bloated salaries of thousands of union executives will no doubt accelerate the transformation of the UAW into a purely business operation. The UAW already sits atop immense financial resources. Recently Italian automaker Fiat paid the UAW-controlled retiree trust fund $4.35 billion to buy out its stake in Chrysler. The trust also controls billions more in GM and Ford stock. This has given the UAW even greater financial incentive to ramp up the exploitation of workers.

The repudiation of the UAW in Chattanooga takes place within the context of a growing rebellion of workers in recent years against the pro-company organization. In January 2010, at the NUMMI plant in Fremont, California, the UAW called police in to defend its officials from workers enraged over the union’s collusion in the plant’s closure. Later that year workers from a GM stamping plant in Indianapolis chased out of a meeting union officials—who were pushing a contract that included a 50 percent pay cut—and established an independent rank-and-file committee.

Auto workers, no doubt, need organization to unite against the global auto giants. But these must be organizations of struggle, controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves, and completely independent of the UAW and other unions, the corporations and big business politicians. Moreover, they must be based on an entirely new strategy: the fight for the international unity of the working class and the political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system.

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