

The UAW debacle in Tennessee

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The vote by Tennessee Volkswagen workers to reject the United Auto Workers was an entirely justified rebuke to an organization that has betrayed the working class for decades. After a two-year, multi-million dollar campaign, the 712-626 vote against the UAW was a stunning defeat for the organization, which believed that the backing of Volkswagen management would ensure its victory.

The so-called “union drive” was an attempt by VW and the UAW to impose the UAW on a work force that did not support the discredited organization, which has not called a national auto strike in nearly four decades and devotes all of its efforts to suppressing the resistance of workers to layoffs, wages cuts and speedup. The UAW and the company attempted to blackmail the workers into voting for the union by suggesting that failure to bring in the UAW would result in a new SUV model being moved to Mexico.

Several media outlets, including the *New York Times*, blamed the loss on the supposed backwardness of southern workers. This is both false and slanderous. Chattanooga VW workers, including many who migrated from northern cities, are well aware of the disastrous record of the UAW in Detroit and other cities that have been decimated by plant closings and mass layoffs.

A sullen-faced Gary Casteel, UAW Region 8 director, announced the loss at a joint press conference with Volkswagen management at the Chattanooga plant. The very fact that the UAW appeared jointly with the company to make the announcement underscored that it was bidding to fill the role of a company union. There is not a shred of class consciousness within the highly paid, corrupt apparatus that runs the organization. In defeat, the union executives felt all the more the need to demonstrate their complete subservience to the auto bosses.

Volkswagen executives were also visibly disappointed. Under US labor law, they required the UAW to provide a legal fig leaf to establish a German-style “works council,” a management-dominated body of workers and supervisors explicitly committed to the interests of the company.

The UAW long ago repudiated any connection to the mass struggles that led to its founding 80 years ago. It is an anti-working class organization, politically allied to the

Democratic Party and dedicated to the defense of the profit system. It has signed contracts with the Big Three auto makers in the US banning strikes and turned itself into a business enterprise that leeches off of the workers it supposedly represents.

In 2009, the UAW collaborated with the Obama administration and General Motors and Chrysler to impose poverty-level wages on new workers, freeze wages, reduce health benefits, abolish the eight-hour day and destroy other previously won gains for auto workers. This has enabled the Detroit-based auto companies to make record profits. It has also paid off handsomely for the UAW executives, who were rewarded with billions in corporate stock.

The UAW welcomed the slashing of the wages of newly hired GM and Chrysler workers by 50 percent to levels equal or even less than those paid at foreign-owned “transplant” factories in the US. This was entirely in line with the strategy of the union to reverse the collapse of its dues income stream by convincing companies such as VW, Toyota, Nissan and Hyundai that they could drive labor costs lower and make more money with the UAW than without it.

Behind the backs of the Chattanooga workers, the UAW signed a “neutrality agreement” pledging that any future labor agreement would be committed to “maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages [Volkswagen] enjoys relative to its competitors in the United States and North America.”

While also agreeing to maintain “high standards” of productivity, i.e., speedup and sweat shop exploitation, the UAW pledged to prevent any strikes, pickets or slowdowns—in other words, to serve as an industrial police force for the company.

Entry level workers at Volkswagen average \$20 an hour—five dollars more than their counterparts at UAW-represented GM, Chrysler and Ford plants. “Enhancing the cost advantages” of the Tennessee plant would translate into a wage cut for VW workers!

And for the privilege of being “represented” by this pro-management organization, workers would be forced to pay tribute in the form of monthly union dues deducted from

their paychecks.

Under the neutrality agreement, the UAW pledged it would “delegate to the Works Council many of the functions and responsibilities ordinarily performed by unions as bargaining a representative in the United States.” The UAW’s counterpart in Germany, IG Metall, which sits on the VW supervisory board, threatened that production of the new SUV model might be moved out of the US.

The UAW looked to the works council scheme as a means to reverse its terminal decline. The organization has lost 75 percent of its membership, more than one million workers, since 1979. It is expected to lose millions of dollars next year, when dues payments for large numbers of auto workers become voluntary in Michigan under the state’s right-to-work law. The defeat in Chattanooga could prove to be the final nail in the coffin of this moribund organization.

For some time, the continued existence of the UAW has been dependent on the support of the US auto companies and the state, under conditions where it has lost the support of rank-and-file workers.

The *New York Times*, *Businessweek* and the *Detroit Free Press* ran articles lamenting the defeat in Tennessee and blaming workers for not being sufficiently enlightened to vote for the UAW. All of them attributed the vote result to agitation by right-wing Republicans such as Tennessee Senator Bob Corker.

New York Times editorial board member Teresa Tritch said the defeat was a missed opportunity for “what would have been a promising development in labor/management relations in the United States.” She praised the UAW for its “increasing role in the rebound of American automakers since the bailout,” adding that openness to the works council model “demonstrated its ability to adapt to changing business imperatives.”

The rejection of the UAW in Tennessee is not some aberration that can be explained away with references to the peculiarities of the American South. The past several years have seen a growing rebellion of auto workers at UAW plants against the union. This includes struggles by NUMMI workers in California, GM workers in Indianapolis and Lake Orion, Michigan, and Chrysler workers at Michigan’s Dundee Engine plant. UAW officials seeking to impose sellout deals and poverty wages have been thrown out of union halls.

In the case of Indianapolis, workers set up an independent rank-and-file committee to fight against both the company and the UAW. Indignation is growing in particular among younger workers who are condemned to miserable pay and sweatshop conditions.

It is a historical fact that the industrial unions in the US, including the UAW, were founded as a result of a rebellion

against the old craft-dominated American Federation of Labor. Those struggles were led by socialists and left-wing militants.

The organizations that workers built in the 1930s and 1940s have long ago betrayed them and become arms of the corporations and the government. This trajectory was already foretold in the unions’ opposition to an independent political movement of the working class and their alliance with the Democratic Party, which was used to subordinate the working class to the domestic and international interests of American capitalism.

Once again, workers are posed with the need to rebel. New, genuinely democratic organizations of struggle that are entirely independent of the official unions, such as rank-and-file committees, must be built.

This must be linked to the development of a new political strategy, one that rejects the class collaborationist, pro-capitalist and nationalist outlook of the UAW. What American auto workers are facing is part of a global assault, from the savage restructuring and downsizing in Europe to the planned shutdown of the entire auto industry in Australia. To oppose this, workers must coordinate their struggles on an international scale.

Workers in the US face a political struggle against the corporate-financial elite and both parties of American big business.

To secure the right of all workers to a decent-paying job, a socialist program is needed, linking the struggles of auto workers with a movement of the entire working class aimed at establishing a workers’ government and restructuring the economy on the basis of social need, not private profit. This means taking the auto companies out of the hands of the financial interests that control them and putting them under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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