

The political lessons of the UAW debacle in Tennessee

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The defeat of the United Auto Workers in a union recognition vote at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee has provoked an outpouring of handwringing and despair from liberal and pseudo-left publications.

Over the last two weeks, the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, the *American Prospect*, *In These Times*, *Labor Notes*, *Socialist Worker* and other publications have characterized the 712-626 vote against recognizing the UAW as a defeat for the VW workers and for American labor more broadly.

According to their narrative, which echoes that of the union leadership, the UAW is a “progressive” organization whose loss is the result of antiunion Republicans playing upon the backwardness of southern workers and manipulating them to vote against their own interests.

This narrative is a reactionary fiction.

The UAW was supported by VW and 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.” It sought to increase its income stream from union dues at the expense of the VW workers by offering its services to suppress opposition to poverty wages and sweatshop conditions at the Tennessee plant.

The company gave the UAW full access to the factory to address shift meetings, handed UAW representatives its list of employees and publicly advocated the setting up of a German-style “works council” in collaboration with the union. The UAW initially opposed even giving the workers an opportunity to vote on its installation as a de facto company union.

Now the UAW is bitterly complaining of “outside interference.” It is an irony of history—one that reflects the transformation of the UAW into a pro-corporate, anti-working class organization—that it today echoes the “outside agitator” propaganda used by the auto companies against union organizers in the mass struggle of the 1930s that established the UAW.

The *American Prospect*, a publication associated with former Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich, blames the “individualist ethos” of the “white South, particularly among the Scotch-Irish descendants of Appalachia” for the UAW’s defeat.

“If America broke neatly along class lines the UAW should have won Chattanooga in a romp,” the publication states. “But as many unions have discovered, generally to their woe, the politics of race and culture often eclipse those of class in the United States.”

What foul rubbish! Blaming the workers for rejecting outright agents of the bosses! The defeat of the UAW was not a defeat for the working class. The Chattanooga workers were correct to reject this right-wing organization, which has for nearly four decades produced nothing but betrayals and defeats for the working class, leaving a legacy of mass unemployment, ruined lives and decimated cities such as Detroit.

Lacking support among the workers, the UAW and other unions are increasingly dependent on the corporations and the state for survival. This is true not only in the US, but all over the world.

This was underscored by the conviction in France earlier this month of Denis Gautier-Sauvagnac, a former head of the Engineering Employers Association (UIMM), for channeling millions of embezzled euros to the French trade unions. By some accounts, the unions in France receive 90 percent of their budgets, or more

than €4 billion a year, from the employers and the state.

The same corrupt relations exist in every country, from South Africa, where the National Union of Mineworkers collaborated in the massacre of striking miners, to Australia, where the unions are enforcing the shutdown of the entire auto industry, to Europe, where the unions collude in the imposition of austerity and starvation conditions on the working class.

These betrayals cannot be explained simply by pointing to the corruption of union leaders. They are rooted first of all in the character of the trade unions themselves, which are based on the employee-employer relations of the profit system and the private ownership of the means of production by the capitalist ruling elite.

This inherent limitation has been compounded by the nationalist program upon which the unions are based. Under conditions of the globalization of production, unions all over the world have gone from pressuring “their” ruling classes for concessions to the workers to pressuring the workers for ever greater concessions to the corporations, in the name of international competitiveness.

In the United States, the subordination of the working class to capitalism took the form of the political alliance between the unions and the Democratic Party, which was cemented during the anticommunist purges of the 1940s and 1950s. By means of its alliance with the Democrats, the union bureaucracy blocked the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

The unions responded to the decline of American capitalism and the globalization of production in the 1970s and 1980s by deepening their ties to the corporations and the state. The UAW and other unions renounced “adversarial relations” with the employers and embraced the corporatist program of “labor-management partnership,” insisting that everything had to be done to defend the profit of the companies, no matter how severe the consequences for the working class.

Rejecting these right-wing organizations, as the Chattanooga workers did, is necessary, but by no means sufficient. Workers need their own organizations to fight the attacks of multinational companies, global banks and corporate-controlled governments. New organizations, controlled by and answerable to the rank and file and completely independent of the old unions,

must be built.

At the same time, the coming struggles must be guided by an entirely new political strategy, based on the international unification of the working class and the fight for the socialist reorganization of economic and political life.

The working class is confronting not just this or that employer, but an entire economic order, defended in the US by both the Democrats and Republicans. Workers must organize themselves as an independent political force to fight for workers’ power. Only in this way can the grip of the corporate and financial oligarchy be broken and the vast wealth created by the working class be used to satisfy human needs, not private profit.



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