

US auto union meets to install new president

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The United Auto Workers union is holding its 36th Constitutional Convention in Detroit this week. The main items on the agenda are the installation of a new president and the passage of 25 percent membership dues increase.

Many of the 1,100 delegates are national, regional or local officials on the UAW payroll, and most are well versed in colluding with the employers to impose speedup and wage and benefit cuts on the workers they supposedly represent.

An atmosphere of crisis hovers over the convention. Membership levels are at historic lows and there is a great deal of fear within the UAW apparatus that thousands of auto workers will stop paying dues once dues payment becomes voluntary next year under Michigan's "right to work" law.

In his report to the convention, outgoing UAW President Bob King talked of "social and economic justice" and described the UAW as a "membership-driven union." This could not conceal the thoroughly undemocratic and bureaucratic character of the convention and the chasm that separates the organization from the working class.

Rank-and-file UAW members do not even have the right to vote for a new president. All of the top officials are chosen by the convention delegates.

King's successor—current UAW Secretary Treasurer Dennis Williams—has been handpicked by the UAW Administrative Caucus, also known as the Reuther Caucus, which has selected every union president since Walter Reuther died in a plane crash in 1970. The delegates will rubber-stamp the promotion of Williams on Wednesday.

King, the son of a Ford personnel manager, became president in 2010, shortly after the UAW imposed wage cuts of between \$7,000 and \$30,000 per worker as part of the Obama administration's forced bankruptcy and restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler. After taking office, King declared that a "new 21st century UAW" had been born "out of the ashes" of the 2008-09 financial crisis. The new union, he said, "no longer views these managements as our adversaries or enemies, but as partners in innovation and quality," with a "shared goals and a common mission."

He repeated this corporatist drivel in his report to the convention, saying, "We believe that nurturing an

environment of open communication and trust is an essential and effective means of adding value and achieving success... Standing up for our members does not have to imply an adversarial culture."

In the name of labor-management "partnership," the UAW has signed agreements with the Detroit auto makers that abolish the eight-hour day and allow unlimited speedup on the assembly lines. The union has imposed a nine-year wage freeze on older workers, reduced the starting wage of new-hires, in real terms, to the level of what auto workers were paid in 1913, and expanded the use of even lower-paid temporary workers. The union agreed to a six-year ban on strikes.

Realizing a labor cost reduction of nearly a third since 2007, GM, Ford and Chrysler have decided to produce several vehicles at UAW-organized plants in Michigan, Ohio, Missouri and other US states instead of Mexico, China or other low-wage countries.

The outgoing UAW president boasted that the 2011 contract he negotiated contained \$1.3 billion in US investments and "product commitments [that] included work brought back from Mexico, Europe and Asia," while "new work that had been slated to go to other countries was redirected to our UAW facilities."

Evinced a thoroughly pro-corporate mentality that excludes the slightest trace of class consciousness, King said that before he became president of the union, "decades of disinvestment and capital flight had left many Americans deeply pessimistic about their ability to influence corporate investment decisions."

There was, he continued, "a pervasive sense" that "the pull of the 'China price' is too great to overcome." But, King declared proudly, "over the last four years, we have shown that we can move capital back into our communities, saving jobs and creating new ones. That's the power our union gives us."

King did not spell out the secret to his "success." It is, however, felt by auto workers at all UAW plants: lowering the wages and benefits and increasing the level of exploitation of union workers to make UAW plants more profitable than nonunion plants.

The policy of the union, indistinguishable from that of the companies, boils down to poverty wages and sweatshop conditions.

These anti-working class policies have produced a staggering decline in membership, which has fallen from 1.5 million in 1979 to 382,789 in 2013. What few new members have been gained under King's tenure—largely in auto parts, trucking, casinos and universities—came with the blessing of the employers themselves. "The vast majority of the members who organized into the UAW in the last four years—almost 90 percent—did so under a neutrality/majority recognition agreement," King said.

These arrangements involve the UAW agreeing to a sweetheart contract in exchange for management's tacit or open support for a UAW "organizing drive." Upon taking office, King presented the supposedly innovative tactic of gaining employer support as the key to unionizing European- and Asian-owned auto factories in the American south and stemming the membership decline of the union.

Despite such an agreement at Volkswagen's Chattanooga, Tennessee plant—which included an explicit promise that the UAW would maintain the factory's "cost advantage" over Detroit-based auto makers—the UAW failed to win a recognition vote at the facility earlier this year.

The UAW blamed the defeat on "outside interference" by Republican politicians. In reality, the Tennessee workers saw no reason to bring a company-backed organization into the plant to enforce speedup and low wages, and then charge them for this "service" in the form of dues payments automatically deducted from their paychecks.

Annual dues collected by the UAW fell more than 40 percent to \$115 million from 2006 to 2012, as UAW membership fell another 30 percent, according to the *Detroit Free Press*.

The downward spiral of the UAW has provoked concern in corporate boardrooms. A *Detroit Free Press* article in February entitled "Detroit automakers worry about UAW money struggles" noted that Ford, Chrysler and General Motors executives "are increasingly anxious about the 78-year-old union's future."

A forced merger with another union, the article stated, "could disrupt a decade of labor-management peace that has helped America's auto industry survive the financial crisis and emerge much stronger, according to a person with knowledge of executive discussions."

Despite its record of betrayals and its membership collapse, the UAW remains one of the richest US unions, with assets of nearly \$1 billion, including a championship golf course and resort in Black Lake, Michigan and dozens of joint real estate and financial investments with the auto companies. Last year, it gained \$30 million in investment

earnings and sales, and the UAW International dispensed nearly \$80 million to its 800 officers and functionaries.

Nevertheless, the drastic decline in membership and dues income has prompted the move to increase monthly union dues from two hours of pay to two-and-a-half hours—the first dues increase since 1967.

The soon-to-be-installed president, Dennis Williams, 60, has been secretary-treasurer since 2010 and before that served for a decade as a regional director based in Chicago. Williams sits on the corporate board of directors of truck maker Navistar. He has a long record of imposing management's dictates in the agricultural implement and trucking division of the UAW.

In 2004 and 2011, he negotiated contracts with earthmoving equipment giant Caterpillar that ended the employer-paid pension plan, imposed a 20 percent health care contribution on workers, sanctioned plant closings, and reduced pay for newly hired workers to "market-based" wage rates.

The UAW and the news media are touting Williams' military career as a US Marine tank platoon sergeant, underscoring the politically reactionary and chauvinistic ethos of the organization and the well-paid parasites who control it. Williams will be in charge of next year's negotiations for new labor agreements with the Detroit auto makers, as well as with John Deere, Dana, Mitsubishi and Navistar.

He has close political ties to the Obama administration. The UAW web site boasts, "In 2007, Williams played a central role in then-Sen. Barack Obama's upset win in the Iowa caucuses that launched his successful presidential candidacy."

Under conditions of a crisis that threatens its very survival—and facing growing opposition from its own members—the UAW apparatus is seeking even closer ties with the auto companies and the Democratic Party.

The UAW convention takes place a week before General Motors—reeling from the exposure of its cover-up of a deadly manufacturing defect—is expected to appoint a UAW official to its corporate board of directors for the first time in its history. Referring to Vice President Joe Ashton, the GM board said in a statement: "Joe brings a wealth of knowledge from his work across many industries, especially his deep understanding how labor strategy can contribute to a company's success."



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