

US auto union installs long-time wage-cutter as new president

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Delegates to the United Auto Workers 36th Constitutional Convention in Detroit installed UAW Secretary-Treasurer Dennis Williams as president Wednesday to replace retiring President Bob King. The election, little more than a formality, saw King's hand-chosen successor garner more than 98 percent of the vote. Other top UAW officials were reelected by acclamation.

Williams has long experience in serving the interests of the union apparatus and big business and betraying the interests of workers. Before becoming secretary-treasurer, Williams served as director of UAW Region 4 based in Chicago and he currently sits on the board of directors of truck manufacturer Navistar.

In 2004 and 2011 he negotiated concessionary contracts with heavy equipment maker Caterpillar that ended company-paid pension plans, increased health care costs, sanctioned plant closings, and reduced pay for new hires to "market-based" wage rates. The 2004 deal set the standard for the later imposition of the two-tier wage system in the auto industry.

The convention also voted by a wide majority to approve a 25 percent dues increase Tuesday to shore up the union's treasury, depleted by the continuing collapse in membership and the slashing of wages for those remaining in the factories.

The completely undemocratic character of the affair was epitomized by the fact that workers have no right to vote for officers. The only reflection among delegates of the sentiments of rank-and-file workers were the fears some expressed of a rebellion. Decades of unrestrained union-management collaboration has transformed the UAW into the instrument of a well-paid bureaucratic apparatus, hostile and alien to the interests of workers. A large portion of the delegates were regional or local officials hardened by years and

decades of collaborating with the employers.

Nonetheless, the gathering reflected the crisis facing the UAW, which is beset by declining dues income and a growing restiveness among rank-and-file workers, angry over brutal speed-up in the factories and declining living standards. The betrayals of the UAW have resulted in a hemorrhaging of membership, which has fallen by almost 75 percent since 1979.

UAW officials are also concerned about a further mass loss of dues-paying members after the current contracts expire with Chrysler, Ford and GM in 2015. Under terms of so-called right to work legislation enacted by the state of Michigan, a center of auto production, workers will no longer be required to pay dues to the UAW as a condition of employment.

Workers are seething over the erosion of pay and working conditions imposed by the UAW. The union has signed agreements with the Detroit auto companies abolishing the eight-hour day and imposing brutal speed-up. Real wages of two-tier workers have been slashed to a level not seen since before the establishment of the industrial unions in the 1930s.

Under these conditions the UAW is moving ever more firmly into the embrace of the corporations and the Democratic Party, which rely upon the union apparatus to suppress opposition and impose poverty wages on workers. In fact, next week GM is expected to name UAW Vice President Joe Ashton to its board of directors, the first time a UAW official has been named to the board of the largest US automaker.

The corporatist outlook of the UAW was summed up by King during his farewell address Monday, when he told cheering delegates, "We want to show and demonstrate, which we do every day, that having a union workforce is a competitive advantage, not a competitive disadvantage."

The elevation of the union's top financial officer to the president's post is a sign that the UAW is preparing major internal cost-cutting and restructuring. This was reflected in a number of resolutions passed by the convention, including the elimination of one region and one vice president's position. The convention also approved a transfer of \$25 million from the strike fund to implement "restructuring Initiatives."

While the UAW is still the richest US union, in recent years its strike fund has been depleted, falling to \$626 million in 2013, down from \$914 million in 2005. This is not the result of any struggles waged by the UAW—the union calls virtually no strikes. It is in large part because of the diversion of millions of dollars to fund the operations of the bloated union apparatus. A small army of international vice presidents, organizers and servicing representatives earn salaries in excess of \$100,000 a year.

Under the plan approved by the convention, dues will rise to two-and-one-half hours pay per month from the current level of two hours pay. A senior worker currently sees \$56.25 a month deducted from his check, \$675 a year, based on an hourly wage of \$28.125 per hour. That will rise to \$70.32 a month or \$843.75 per year. For second-tier workers earning \$15.78 per hour, current dues of \$31.56 per month, or \$378.72 per year, will rise to \$39.45 per month or \$474.40 per year. Retirees will see an increase in their voluntary dues from \$2 to \$3 a month.

The increase was the first since 1967 when the UAW waged a 66-day strike against Ford that won, among other gains, an improved cost-of-living allowance. That struggle was followed by the two-month strike against General Motors in 1970.

The UAW claims the current dues increase is needed to carry out a struggle in the upcoming auto contract negotiations to eliminate the two-tier wage. This is absurd. The UAW has not called a company-wide strike in decades. Senior auto workers have not had a pay raise in nine years, and in 2009 the UAW agreed to a six-year no strike deal with Chrysler and General Motors.

Further, the assertion by the UAW that organizing gains will translate into better wages for current workers is patently false. The only new members that the UAW has brought in have been the result of sweetheart deals signed behind the backs of the workers

pledging to keep wages low and profits high. The exposure of such a deal—signed between the UAW and Volkswagen—contributed to the defeat of the UAW at the Chattanooga, Tennessee VW plant earlier this year.

In the discussion of the dues increase, delegates expressed a degree of nervousness over the brazen character of the UAW's money grab under conditions where the union has slashed the wages of auto workers.

The reaction of workers in the auto plants bears this out. Robert, a second-tier worker at Chrysler's Warren Truck assembly plant outside of Detroit reacted angrily to news that the UAW had enacted a dues increase. "How are they doing that? We shouldn't be paying them if they don't have our interests at heart," he told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

He explained that he had to have a second job in order to survive financially. "Chrysler money isn't enough to pay my bills. I have to make it up on my other jobs. I have a mortgage and a car note and a daughter going to college. I work harder at Chrysler than at my other job. I am on the assembly line. Every two hours we get a 12-minute break. I take energy drinks and do what I have to do to get through the day. I have to take care of my family.

"We are building \$65,000 trucks and can't afford to buy the product we build. That's crazy." Referring to the rabid Buy American chauvinism promoted by the UAW Robert said, "They want us to drive Chrysler, but we can't afford to buy Chrysler."



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