

The UAW's loyal opposition

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Nearly 140,000 GM, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler workers confront a major battle this summer, as the labor agreements at the Detroit automakers expire on September 14. Although the auto companies are making huge profits, they are determined to resist workers' demands for improved living standards and working conditions.

Workers are in a struggle not just against the auto bosses but also the Obama administration and the entire economic order. The relentless lowering of wages has been central to the strategy of the American ruling class for decades, and the financial and corporate elite has no intention to retreat.

As for the UAW and the rest of the pro-capitalist unions, they are just as determined to maintain poverty level wages in order to attract new investment and dues paying members.

Facing growing demands from rank-and-file workers to abolish the hated two-tier wage system, end abusive work schedules and win significant pay increases after a decade of frozen wages, the UAW postured at last month's bargaining convention in Detroit as an opponent of the very same measures it has endorsed for years. UAW President Dennis Williams mouthed rhetoric about "bridging the gap" in wages and "rebuilding the middle class," while assuring the auto companies that the union would do nothing to undermine their profits and globally competitive position.

A key role in this charade was played by a host of self-described "dissidents" in the UAW, who are supported by pseudo-left groups such as Spark, the International Socialist Organization and the *Labor Notes* publication.

These include Gary Walkowicz, a bargaining committeeman from UAW Local 600 at Ford's Dearborn Truck Plant who ran for the UAW presidency on a "no concessions" platform in 2010 and 2014; Bill Parker, the former president of Local 1700 at Chrysler's Sterling Heights Assembly plant in suburban Detroit; and Gregg Shotwell, a retired local union official from a Delphi auto parts plant in western Michigan who is a long-time supporter of the New Directions faction of the UAW bureaucracy.

All of these forces perpetuate the myth that the UAW is a viable organization, albeit with poor leaders, that can be forced to abandon its policy of union-management partnership and fight for the working class if "pushed from below."

At the same time they seek to cover-up the broader political issues confronting the working class, thus reinforcing the nationalist and pro-capitalist ideology of the UAW. They reject the need for an independent political strategy of the working class, insisting that reforms are possible within the framework of the existing political and economic setup.

Writing on the convention, for example, the Spark group stated, "The fact that the union administration felt the need to address [the

issue of two-tier wages] was proof that pressure against the current wage structure has been building in the union." It continued, "Many delegates at the convention are wise to the administration's strategies, which are, in fact, corporate strategies." Delegates, including Walkowicz, it further writes, "wore T-Shirts that read 'No More Tiers' and spoke up for a fighting policy from the convention floor."

To present the stage-managed discussion on the convention floor as some kind of intense debate over strategy is a fraud. With rank-and-file workers excluded and the decisions made well in advance, the discussion was nothing but a ritual involving delegates, largely drawn from local union machinery, who are well aware that their progress up the ladder at the UAW depends on loyalty to the corporations and the union hierarchy.

Spark reserves particular praise for Walkowicz. Far from exposing the conspiracy being prepared by the UAW, Walkowicz politely urged the UAW executives to alter the language of the bargaining resolution from "bridging the gap" in wages to "putting an end to 2-tier." In a letter to the convention, he made it clear that such a verbal change was advisable to temper the deep hostility of workers towards the union and prevent an exodus of members when Michigan's Republican-backed right-to-work law, which makes union membership and dues payment voluntary, goes into effect for auto workers in September.

In a similar vein, Bill Parker urged bargainers to add specific language to the resolution committing the UAW to fight for all Tier 2 workers to be promoted to Tier 1. This was quickly shot down when UAW Secretary-Treasurer Gary Casteel declared that the proposal conflicted with other resolution language, and Parker failed to secure the support of 94 delegates to bring the motion to the floor.

A supporter of *Labor Notes*, Parker has made a career of claiming that the UAW can be reformed even as it has resorted to gangster methods to impose the dictates of the corporations. This was most sharply revealed in 2007 when Parker capitulated to the campaign of intimidation by the UAW to push through the two-tier system against overwhelming opposition. Rather than calling for a rebellion, let alone a break with the UAW, Parker all but dropped his opposition to the contract, assuring its passage at critical Detroit-area plants, including his own, and its adoption nationally. (See: "How the UAW pushed through its sellout at Chrysler").

Finally, there is Gregg Shotwell. The former UAW delegate led the Soldiers of Solidarity group that played a key role in sabotaging the struggle by Delphi auto parts workers against the UAW imposition of savage wage and benefit cuts during the 2005 bankruptcy of the GM spinoff.

Shotwell specializes in posing as a shop floor militant, denouncing the union leadership while insisting at the same time that workers can “take back the UAW.” For all his rhetoric, the answer to workers’ problems, he insists, is various factory protests, including work-to-rule slowdowns. He gives no explanation of how such actions can take on the most powerful corporations in the world, backed up by the capitalist courts, politicians and other repressive institutions, including the unions themselves.

In an article posted in the ISO’s *Socialist Worker* on March 30, Shotwell writes, “If workers want to profit in a capitalist society, we must mount the teeter-totter with a preponderance of force, not pleas and platitudes... Neither moral nor financial arguments will convince the captains of capital to surrender a pound of ground. Strike or beg.”

As for the UAW, he complains, “We don’t need unions to cut wages, eliminate pensions, and hire temps. Why join a union that works for the boss? If rank-and-file workers want a raise, we need to organize outside, above and beyond the gelded office-rats in charge of negotiations with the boss.”

Shotwell does not, however, call for workers to break with the UAW. Instead he suggests that it can do something other than cut wages, eliminate pensions and hire temps, if only workers pressure it to reform. And how is that to be accomplished?

The “ratification of contracts is the most effective exercise of democracy in the union,” he claims, adding, “The ballot gains a voice that can be heard above the din of media hacks and corporate lackeys in union hats.” In fact, the UAW is notorious for threatening workers with job loss to push through sellout deals, rigging votes or simply re-voting until workers “get it right.”

As he did during the Delphi struggle, Shotwell insists that factory floor protests are sufficient. “The threat of a strike gains credence when preparations commence months in advance,” he says, adding that “it’s the rank and file’s task to reduce inventory with slowdowns. Longshore workers didn’t strike, but they leveraged negotiations by hamstringing profits. Power was the persuader.”

In fact, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union organized a number of stunts in order to let off steam after forcing workers to labor without a contract for months. The ship and dock owners then responded by locking out 20,000 dockworkers on the West Coast earlier this year, only to be reinforced by the Obama administration, which sent in Labor Secretary Thomas Perez—an invited guest at the UAW bargaining convention—to essentially impose a settlement. The ILWU is now in the process of trying to push this sellout deal, which will further undermine job security and allow for the expansion of casual workers.

Shotwell does not once mention the Obama administration, which has fully backed the assault on auto workers, particularly through the restructuring of the auto industry in 2009, which was centered on the expansion of the two-tier wage system. This is no accident. What Shotwell, Parker, Walkowicz and others want to prevent above all is the development of an understanding within the working class that they confront a political struggle against the capitalist system.

These officials speak for a section of mid-level union

functionaries who fear a rebellion of rank-and-file workers and desperately want to contain it within the confines of the UAW. They are backed by the pseudo-left groups, which are heavily invested in the unions because they help maintain the domination of the Democratic Party over workers and, increasingly, provide them with lucrative positions in the union bureaucracy.

A precondition for any serious fight is an understanding that the UAW cannot be revived. What is required is a rebellion against the UAW and the building of new, genuinely democratic organizations of struggle, to prepare strike action and rally the working class as a whole.

At the same time there is no way to fight massive companies like GM, Ford and Chrysler without challenging the entire economic and political set-up in America that defends the “right” of corporate bosses to slash wages and carry out mass layoffs and factory closings. The working class must have an independent political strategy. This means a break with the Democratic Party and building an independent political movement in opposition to the profit system.

To answer the offensive of globalized capital, the relentless drive of the bosses to shift production to low-wage regions and destroy the past gains of the working class, workers must build their own mass party, fighting to unite American workers with their class brothers and sisters around the world for the reorganization of economic life on the basis of human need, not the ever more obscene accumulation of private wealth.

The global auto industry cannot be left in the hands of multi-millionaire CEOs and vulture capitalists but must be taken over by the working class and transformed into publicly owned and democratically controlled enterprises.

Preparations must be made now for an industry-wide strike, mobilizing the broadest support in the working class for this struggle. The reactionary outlook of the UAW and its alliance with the Democratic Party must be rejected and the fight begun for the political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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