

Behind the UAW news blackout

What is taking place in the US auto contract negotiations?

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On Tuesday, United Auto Workers Vice President Cindy Estrada emailed GM workers and said the union would not tell them anything about the contract negotiations between the union and the “Big Three” US auto companies—General Motors, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler.

Contracts covering 140,000 workers expire midnight Monday and the union has kept the rank-and-file totally in the dark, refusing to divulge even the proposed length of a new agreement. The auto makers and the UAW are acutely aware of the anger among workers over the union’s silence and the workers’ contempt for an organization that has for decades collaborated with the auto bosses in imposing plant closures, layoffs and cuts in wages and benefits.

This concern was reflected in an article published Thursday by the *Detroit News* and headlined “Silence irks some in UAW rank-and-file.” Both the company and union executives are particularly concerned over the impact of the *World Socialist Web Site* and its Autoworker Newsletter among the workers, who are increasingly turning to them as a source of information and a guide to action. Hence the warning in the article that “Many [autoworkers] have taken to social media and local web sites to voice concerns over the silence, as well as their high expectations for this round of negotiations.”

The workers want to know what is going on behind closed doors in the talks between the union and the companies. They can catch only glimpses from news reports, and the picture that emerges isn’t pretty. The UAW is preparing another betrayal.

In an article published September 3 by the *Detroit News*, business columnist Daniel Howes rained praise on the UAW for its “business-like” approach to the negotiations. “The pace and tone of this year’s bargaining are remarkable for what isn’t happening so far,” Howes wrote, adding that the “looming barriers to ratification... are being systematically removed.”

He went on to ask, “How come UAW President Dennis Williams isn’t talking to [Detroit radio station] WJR to denounce one of the companies? Where is the tension usually accompanying the quadrennial rite forged in the 1930s?”

Howes quotes Art Schwartz, a former GM labor-relations executive: “When there’s no controversy or yelling, the word

‘business-like’ comes out. It’s true. Part of it is Dennis’ personality.”

Howes then notes that “where Williams’ predecessors tended to play tough-guy outsiders looking into the business, he is leveraging a decade as a director of Navistar International Corp. to inform a management style that relies on modeling and analysis to shape contract proposals, responses to the automakers, and tone.”

The servility of the UAW is not simply a personal flaw of its president. It reflects the social interests—hostile to those of the workers—represented by the organization Williams heads. To pose the issue another way: What does the presence of such an outright company man in the leadership say about the nature of the UAW itself?

The interests of the companies and those of the workers are fundamentally opposed, since the companies make their profit by exploiting the labor of the workers. In contract negotiations, the more the companies get, the less the workers get. Why, then, is there no “controversy” or “tension” between the companies and the union?

The answer is that the UAW is itself a business, whose income stems from its role as an agency of the companies. It is not the representative of the autoworkers.

This relationship is explained clearly in a book published this year by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, titled *Inside the Ford-UAW Transformation, Pivotal Events in Valuing Work and Delivering Results*. The book itself is a product of the collaboration of the UAW with management. Its authors include Ford Vice President of Labor Affairs Martin Mulloy and Dan Brooks, a 35-year UAW bureaucrat. The book’s preface notes that “as an ongoing process of changing the underlying assumptions guiding labor and management, the Ford-UAW transformation is visible through the lens of more than 50 pivotal events over 30 years.” What the UAW-Ford authors call “pivotal events” the workers call betrayals. Practically each page of this book is filled with statements revealing the pro-corporate character of the UAW. Though the book focuses specifically on the UAW’s relationship with Ford, the union conducts itself on the same basis with all three

auto companies.

It is not possible to document here each betrayal detailed in the book. However, the authors let slip an important truth about where the responsibility lies for the relentless attacks on working conditions, wages and jobs. It is “the union—more so than management” that is “the driving force for change, altering the stereotypical narrative about unions,” the authors write.

That is because the union has the tough job of steamrolling the workers to force through the company’s demands. The problem is that workers are near unanimous in their opposition to concessions. As the authors put it, “even with the galvanizing threat of a potential plant closing, however, there is still resistance to change and success is far from assured.” This is where the UAW really shines. The authors brag about the process by which the union stifles working class consciousness in order to ram through sell-out contracts. They note that there is often “a toxic culture where compromise and joint problem solving are seen as weaknesses of character,” and where workers “distrust management and have a class view of social interaction within the plant.” The union and company use the term “problem plant” to describe those factories where a worker “identifies with the working class, expecting to be exploited by management.”

This could not be more clear. The great evil is an elementary level of class consciousness among the workers, which reflects the reality of the objectively irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the working class and those of the capitalist class. The task of the UAW is to extirpate this consciousness. This is its essential service to the auto companies and the capitalist class as a whole.

Dan Brooks, the UAW bureaucrat and co-author, explains his own role in “relaxing contractual work rules” at his home plant, Monroe (Michigan) Stamping, in 1981. “Making a shift like this was incredibly difficult,” he says. “You get elected on one platform and now it’s a roll of the dice whether people will still support you after the change.”

UAW Employee Resource Coordinator John Nahornyj recalls another occasion, when the union rammed through a sellout contract at Cleveland Engine Plant 1: “[T]here was resistance like you wouldn’t believe,” he declares.

In breaking the workers’ resistance, the authors note, the UAW has played a role “unprecedented in the history of US collective bargaining.” The result has been an endless series of attacks, give-backs and concessions, resulting in the gutting of virtually all the gains won in bitter struggle by generations of auto workers, and a return, in many respects, to the conditions of industrial slavery that prevailed prior to the mass struggles that gave birth to the UAW in the depths of the Great Depression.

Most recently, this has included the establishment of two-tier wages, with newer workers making, in inflation-adjusted terms, less than their great-grandfathers made under Henry Ford. Now

the UAW is out to strip all Big Three workers—active as well as retired, salaried as well as hourly—of health benefits contractually guaranteed and provided by the companies, and make them instead subject to the vagaries of the stock market under a union-controlled trust fund.

Ford Executive Mark Fields declares that none of these attacks could have been carried out without the help of the UAW. “I always love the question when I meet people outside the industry,” he writes. “It is always about us having to deal with the UAW. I am dumbfounded. We are all part of the Ford family. We all have Ford Motor Company on our paychecks. It is the way we were brought up. There is a reason we haven’t had a strike or work stoppage since 1976.”

As Fields notes at another point, “[T]his is the way we do business. It is not just a transaction with the union. The UAW leadership is part of the team for delivering the business.”

That’s right: the union disarms the workers and delivers them at the company’s doorstep so they can be ever more brutally exploited.

Workers should have no illusions about what the union is doing in the closed-door talks with management, nor about the thuggish campaign it will carry out in the coming days to force through another rotten deal. The union keeps workers in the dark because it knows it would face a rebellion if workers knew the truth about the “business-like,” i.e., pro-company, character of the negotiations.

New organizations are needed to mobilize workers to put an end to this company-union conspiracy once and for all. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of rank-and-file committees by the workers, of the workers, and for the workers, independent of the UAW, to unite autoworkers and workers from other industries in the US and internationally in a real fight against the companies. To learn more, contact us and become an active supporter of the Autoworker Newsletter in your plant.



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