

The UAW and the Democratic Party

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The United Auto Workers was created in the 1930s in the heat of a massive revolt of industrial workers. But when it emerged, the US labor movement, virtually alone in the world, had never built a political party of its own.

This is not because there were no social classes and no class struggle in American history, as is often claimed. The enormous growth of capitalism between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the start of World War I in 1914 created the largest and most international working class in the world. The cities, towns, and coal patches were the scenes of ferocious strikes, riots, massacres and occasional armed uprisings.

Yet for all of the US labor movement's militancy, self-sacrifice and social power, its Achilles heel was its failure to free itself from the political domination of capitalist parties and politicians. The workers fought the bosses' police and thugs in the streets, but at the ballot box they voted for politicians selected from the bosses' two parties.

Within this two-party system, the Democratic Party was assigned a particular function. Its task was to defend the basic interests of capital by posing as a party of the "common man" against the Republicans, who unapologetically championed big business.

Every mass social movement—beginning with the Populist movement of farmers in the 1880s and 1890s, to the anti-monopoly Progressive movement of the early 1900s, to the revolt of industrial workers of the 1930s out of which the UAW was born, to the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, to the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s—was channeled behind the Democratic Party to be smothered, declawed and defeated.

There is historical irony in the Democratic Party playing this role. In the 19th century, it was first the party of the southern slavocracy, and, after the Civil War, the party of Jim Crow white supremacy. It was its lesser northern wing, controlled by sections of capital and operating big city "machines" such as New York's Tammany Hall, that prefigured the party's 20th century incarnation.

Pro-slavery ideologues and propagandists linked to the Democratic Party attacked the brutality of emerging industrial capitalism in the North and posed as critics of wage slavery, while portraying Southern chattel slavery as a natural and beneficent system. They sought to inspire fear among northern workers that the liberation of the blacks in the South would undermine their own wages and living standards.

The Democratic city machines solicited the support of northern workers, including immigrant populations such as the Irish, and doled out patronage, while engaging in demagogic attacks against "privilege."

The labor movement that emerged after the Civil War—the Knights of Labor in the 1870s and 1880s followed by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the 1880s and 1890s—did not build a mass party of its own, but neither did it formally support the Democratic Party. This changed in World War I during the administration of Woodrow Wilson, when the AFL sought to prevent workers from striking, and worked to stamp out the growing influence of socialism and sympathy for the Russian Revolution in exchange for federal mediation of labor disputes.

The AFL's rapid growth during World War I was wiped out in its immediate aftermath by a ferocious corporate counteroffensive linked to

the first "Red Scare." Under Wilson, the American ruling class and state, backed by the corporate-controlled media, responded to the 1917 Russian Revolution and the eruption of mass labor struggles within the US (the 1913 Paterson, New Jersey silk strike, the 1919 steel strike) by conjuring up an atmosphere of hysteria against anarchists and "Bolsheviks." Thousands of left-wing workers and intellectuals, mostly immigrants, were jailed in mass roundups and deported.

But the integration of the labor bureaucrats with "progressive" elements in and around the Democratic Party—figures such as labor reformists Frank Walsh, Frances Perkins and Felix Frankfurter—had taken a step forward. Their role exemplified the connection between the fight for the political independence of the working class and the struggle to free the working class from the influence of middle class reformism and anti-Marxist radicalism.

The UAW arose out of fierce and quasi-insurrectionary class struggles, in which workers defied and faced off against not only the corporations, but also their police, troops courts and politicians. The union was not a gift handed down to workers by Franklin D. Roosevelt, as subsequently portrayed by the union leadership.

At the height of the Depression in 1933, cities such as Detroit, Toledo and Chicago had unemployment rates ranging from 50 percent to 90 percent. The following year saw the eruption of general strikes in Minneapolis, Toledo and San Francisco, each of them led by socialist workers, and, in the case of Minneapolis, by Trotskyists.

These were followed by a strike movement, in which socialist workers figured prominently, that culminated in the 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike. That 44-day struggle, in which the workers seized control of key plants in Flint, shutting down much of General Motors production nationally, and refused to budge even after national guard troops set up machine gun nests outside the occupied factories, humbled GM and compelled it to recognize the UAW as the exclusive bargaining agent for its hourly employees.

The revolt of the autoworkers inspired industrial struggles across the US. The strikes were waged against the corporations and politicians of both parties. They were preceded by a break with the right-wing, craft union-dominated AFL—which treated industrial workers as social pariahs—and the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), formed to establish mass industrial unions.

Fearing insurrection—the strike movement came less than 20 years after the Russian Revolution—the administration of Franklin Roosevelt offered its New Deal reforms and intervened to bring corporations to the bargaining table. On March 2, 1937, just weeks after the end of the Flint sit-down strike, US Steel, the notorious bastion of anti-unionism, avoided a strike and acceded to the establishment of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (later the United Steel Workers Union).

In exchange, the CIO sought to rein in the strike wave. Its leading figures, John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers (UMW) and Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, believed that in Roosevelt and the Democratic Party they had found allies who would bring into line anti-union holdouts such as the Ford Motor Company and "Little Steel," the name given US Steel's major competitors. This policy quickly proved bankrupt.

On May 30, 1937, ten striking steelworkers were gunned down by Chicago police in the Memorial Day Massacre, in response to which Roosevelt issued his infamous “plague on both your houses” remark, all but blaming the workers for the violence.

Roosevelt’s statement was taken as a green light. On June 19, in Youngtown, Ohio, police murdered two striking steelworkers, and on July 11, in Massillon, Ohio, they killed 3 more. The Little Steel Strike was crushed and the Ford organization drive stalled. In spite of this, the CIO refused to break with the Democratic Party.

There existed substantial support among workers for a break with the Democrats. At the UAW founding convention in 1935, a majority of delegates voted for the formation of a labor party. A second vote refusing to endorse Roosevelt was reversed after Lewis’s lieutenant, Adolph Germer, threatened to cut off funding for the nascent organization.

Lewis, Hillman, and the other union heads who had been catapulted into national prominence by the emergence of the CIO, now fought to preserve the subordination of American workers to the Democratic Party and combat the widespread influence of socialism. In a September 3, 1937 national radio address, Lewis unequivocally demanded that the CIO defend the capitalist system. He declared:

Unionization, as opposed to communism, presupposes the relationship of employment; it is based on the wage system and it recognizes fully and unreservedly the institution of private property and the right to investment profit. It is upon the fuller development of collective bargaining, the wider expansion of the labor movement, the increased influence of labor in our national councils that the perpetuity of our democratic institutions must largely depend. The organized workers of America, free in their industrial life, conscious partners in production, secure in their homes, enjoying a decent standard of living, will prove the finest bulwark against the intrusion of alien doctrines of government.

Yet, under conditions of a new economic crisis, the so-called Roosevelt Recession of 1937-1939, and the counteroffensive by capital announced by the Little Steel violence, the rapid growth of the CIO ground to a halt. The influx of new members into the UAW stalled. The Steel Workers Organizing Committee “was deeply demoralized and withering away by late 1937,” in the words of historian Steven Fraser (*Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, 1989). By 1939, just two years after the sit-down strikes, the CIO’s leader, Phillip Murray, would declare, “We are living in a wave and an age and an era of reaction.”

Analyzing these developments from his final exile in Mexico City, Leon Trotsky insisted that the only way forward for American workers was along the path of political struggle. “In the United States the situation is that the working class needs a party—its own party,” Trotsky wrote. “It is the first step in political education ... It is an objective fact in the sense that the new trade unions created by the workers came to an impasse—a blind alley.”

Taking its lead from Trotsky, the Trotskyist movement in the US, the Socialist Workers Party, called for the unions to establish a labor party based on a socialist program, in order to arm the insurgent movement of workers with a revolutionary perspective in opposition to the trade union bureaucracy and the Stalinists of the Communist Party USA. The latter, in accordance with Moscow’s “Popular Front” line, supported Roosevelt and the Democrats. The first aim of the labor party demand was thus to break the working class from the Democratic Party.

Trotsky insisted that the decisive issue in considering whether to advance this demand was not the prevailing consciousness among American workers, many of whom still held illusions in Roosevelt, but the

requirements of the objective situation, in which the international question was decisive. The revolt of the American industrial workers came in the context of working class defeats, in which Stalinism had played the critical role: the betrayal of the British General Strike in 1926, the decimation of the Chinese working class in 1927, the coming to power of the Nazis in Germany in 1933, and the defeats of the Spanish and French working classes between 1936 and 1938.

Under these challenging conditions, the labor party demand was seen as a means of fighting for the program of world socialist revolution in the US, where the mass industrial unions had exploded onto the scene virtually overnight in the late 1930s before just as quickly faltering.

“The rise of the CIO is incontrovertible evidence of the revolutionary tendencies within the working masses,” Trotsky wrote in 1940. “Indicative and noteworthy in the highest degree, however, is the fact that the new ‘leftist’ trade union organization was no sooner founded than it fell into the steel embrace of the imperialist state. The struggle among the tops between the old federation [the AFL] and the new is reducible in large measure to the struggle for the sympathy and support of Roosevelt and his cabinet.”

World War II handed the CIO a temporary reprieve. It joined the AFL in attempting to enforce no-strike pledges on workers, while American imperialism settled accounts with its German and Japanese rivals. In return, federal mediators and courts ruled in favor of the union shop, including at Ford in 1941 and “Little Steel” in 1942 and 1943. The Stalinists of the CP, following orders from the Soviet Union, which was then in a wartime alliance with the US, aided and abetted the no-strike pledge and cheered the imprisonment of the American Trotskyists in 1941, including the leader of the SWP, James P. Cannon.

The no-strike pledge was only partially effective during the war. There were nearly as many strikes in 1944 as there had been in 1937. Then, in the war’s aftermath, 1945 and 1946, the American working class erupted in the largest strike wave in its history. Many of these were wildcat strikes, carried out not only against the corporations, but also against the AFL and CIO and their Stalinist allies.

This was the domestic context of the post-World War II Red Scare, which, contrary to myth, began not with Republican Senator Joe McCarthy, but in the trade unions. In 1947, Democratic Party politicians combined with Republicans to impose the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act, which gave the president the right to outlaw strikes he declared a threat to “national security,” and which included an anti-communist loyalty oath.

That same year, President Harry S. Truman, a Democrat, gave an address to Congress asking for \$400 million to prop up the royalist government in Greece against “the terrorist activities of ... Communists.” During his administration, Truman founded the NSA and the CIA, announced that the American military would defend “free people” anywhere in the world, and invoked Taft-Hartley against American workers a dozen times. The Cold War was on, at home and abroad.

Anti-communist bureaucrats such as Walter Reuther of the UAW used the situation to muscle out union officials and workers who adhered to ideas of changing the social order. Between 1948 and 1950, the CIO purged from its ranks eleven unions representing 1 million workers. Thousands more officials and workers were driven out of individual unions like the UAW. The purge of the radical and militant workers, many of whom had led the great struggles of the 1930s, was inseparable from the unions’ full embrace of American imperialism.

This was epitomized by Reuther’s “Treaty of Detroit,” the 1950 contract agreement with General Motors that hitched the fate of the UAW, and the workers it represented, to the global domination of the Big Three. GM promised increased wages and benefits and a “seat at the table” for the union bureaucrats. In exchange, the UAW accepted corporate domination of the workplace. The heady demands of the 1930s—“workers control” and “industrial democracy”—were repudiated.

For a time, Reuther's treaty seemed to work. The Big Three's enormous market share after World War II allowed higher wages and benefits. The same workers who had occupied the factories in the "Hungry 30s" could now own the cars they made, buy homes, and make plans to send their children to college.

Rising living standards, along with the anti-communist purges, greatly weakened the influence of socialism among the autoworkers, who nonetheless carried out a number of major strikes from the 1950s through the 1970s to force the automakers to uphold their end of the bargain.

Under these conditions, many autoworkers would have found plausible Reuther's claim, made in 1948, that there were no social classes in America, and therefore no need for a workers' party:

In Europe, where you have society developed along very classical economic lines, where you have rigid class groupings, there labor parties are a natural political expression because there you have a highly fixed and class society. [W]e have a society that is not rigid in character along class lines, and that is the great hope of America.

But there were no new organizational breakthroughs for the UAW and the CIO after World War II. Their anti-communism and pro-corporate character having eliminated all meaningful differences, in 1955 the CIO, under Reuther's leadership, merged with the AFL on terms dictated by AFL President George Meany, who became the president of the AFL-CIO.

This entailed the abandonment of any further effort to organize the majority of workers still outside of the union ranks. Organized labor had already embarked on its course of inexorable decline.

Reuther's treaty had, in fact, been based on historical circumstances that soon eroded. The Japanese and German automakers reemerged in the 1950s, and by the 1960s were cutting into the Big Three's global market share. Afterwards, they began to conquer increasing shares of the US market. Profit rates declined and capital in the US flowed out of productive investment and into financial speculation.

Now, with the decline of American industry and the global position of US capitalism, the implications of the failure to build a socialist party came to the fore. The UAW, with its pro-capitalist perspective, had no answer to layoffs resulting from the automation of production, which developed rapidly in the 1960s, or the movement of factories and industrial jobs from heavily unionized states such as Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania to the anti-union South.

The CIO's abortive effort to organize the South after World War II, Operation Dixie, had fallen victim to the anti-communist purge and Reuther's fears over disturbing the UAW's alliance with the Democratic Party, which exercised a political monopoly and enforced Jim Crow segregation throughout the region. Some 25 years later, the disastrous implications of this betrayal of the working class began to hit home in the unionized Northeast and Midwest, which lost 2 million manufacturing jobs in the 1970s, while the Sun Belt gained 1 million. By the 1980s, once rural North Carolina had the highest percentage of manufacturing jobs of any state—and the lowest wages and rate of unionization.

The 1970s found the unions' nationalist, pro-capitalist road rapidly failing. The Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, continued to fight for the formation of an independent party of the working class. The pages of its newspaper, the *Bulletin*, provide the most complete chronicle of the last great strike wave in American history, which lasted from 1969 through the late 1970s, and the struggle of the Trotskyist movement for socialism in the US working class.

This was carried out in the midst of another great crisis of capitalist rule,

caused by the end of the post-World War II economic boom, which came to a head with Nixon's scrapping of gold backing for the dollar in 1971, along with the collapse of the war in Vietnam, which saw the destruction of both the Johnson (1963-1969) and Nixon (1969-1974) presidencies, and the ghetto rebellions that swept the cities in the late 1960s.

The crisis was such that the Workers League's call for a labor party and workers' government found a growing response in the working class. This was acknowledged in a backhanded way by Meany in a 1972 interview with *US News and World Report* :

[I]f we set up our own political party, we'd be telling this country that we're ready to run the Government, and I don't think that we're ready—I don't think we're qualified to run the Government. I don't think any special interest group is qualified to run the Government. I don't think General Motors should run the Government, and I don't think the AFL-CIO should run the Government.

The working class, even without a mass party, continued to demonstrate its industrial strength. In defiance of Nixon's "wage freeze" policy, workers carried out scores of strikes to keep wages in line with spiraling inflation. In 1978, coal miners defied a Taft-Hartley back-to-work order by Democratic President Jimmy Carter. The miners' response: "Carter invoked Taft-Hartley. Now let him come down here and enforce it."

The union bureaucrats could not permit a break with the Democratic Party, as had been posed by the coal miners' defiance of Carter. The bankruptcy and bailout of Chrysler in 1979 offered a new course. Rather than mobilizing workers for a showdown, the UAW cooperated with the Carter administration, Chrysler and Wall Street financiers in imposing wage concessions, layoffs and plant closures.

Behind this historic capitulation by the unions were profound objective changes in the structure of world capitalism. The rise of truly transnational corporations—producing in factories around the world directly for the world, rather than merely the national, market—was the hallmark of an unprecedented globalization of production and finance. This development undercut all labor organizations based on national programs, including the UAW and the AFL-CIO.

They had no progressive answer to the emergence of a global labor market, which enabled corporations to shift production rapidly from higher- to lower-wage regions. Their response, based on the defense of the profit system and the national interests of the American ruling class, was to join with the companies in slashing the wages, jobs, benefits and conditions of their own members, in order to induce the companies to keep production at home and keep the union bureaucrats' revenue stream from dues-paying members flowing.

That same year, 1979, Carter appointed Paul Volcker to head the Federal Reserve Board. Volcker raised interest rates past 20 percent in order to cause mass unemployment and thereby drive down wages and break the strike wave. In 1982 alone, 2,700 mass layoffs resulted in 1.25 million industrial jobs lost. Detroit, Flint, Pontiac, Toledo, St. Louis, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and the rest of the industrial heartland were shattered.

Volcker's "shock therapy" and Carter's attack on the Chrysler workers proved the opening salvos in a ruling class counteroffensive. They were followed by Ronald Reagan's crushing of the strike of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981, which set a pattern that repeated throughout the 1980s, including among UAW workers in the parts plants and at heavy machinery manufacturer Caterpillar. All the old brutal methods of class rule were revived. Union-busting—the use of scabs, strike-breakers and violence against strikers—virtually unheard of for some 30 years, became

commonplace.

The UAW and AFL-CIO attributed the attack solely to Reagan. But the offensive was conducted jointly by Democratic-controlled Congresses, Democratic mayors and Democratic governors, such as Minnesota's Rudy Perpich and Arizona's Bruce Babbitt, each of whom called out the National Guard to crush strikes in the 1980s.

In the face of this onslaught, workers showed they were ready to fight. They carried out long and bitter strikes again and again. But just as many times they were isolated and betrayed by the unions that claimed to represent them.

The repeated betrayals in the 1980s coincided with the unions' open adoption of the ideology and program of corporatism—the renunciation of any conception of class struggle and advocacy of the supposed identity of interests of workers and the corporations. The UAW was the most aggressive of the official unions in adopting a policy of “jointness,” rapidly entering into union-management programs and structures with the Big Three automakers at the national, regional and local level. It boasted of relations with the auto companies that the pioneer militants and socialists who built the UAW knew only too well to be the hallmarks of hated company unions.

This went hand in hand with the promotion of economic nationalism, protectionism and outright chauvinism and racism against autoworkers in Japan, Mexico, Europe and even Canada. In this way, the UAW sought to line up US workers behind “their” bosses and justify layoffs and concessions as necessary sacrifices to ensure the ability of the Big Three to compete with their foreign rivals for market share and profits. This fratricidal and divisive policy, which, of course, played right into the hands of the companies, was implemented in the name of “defending jobs.” Its result was the destruction of tens of thousands more auto jobs and a massive contraction in UAW membership.

By the end of the 1980s, the official American labor movement had been shattered. The unions could no longer be called defensive organizations of the working class. To be sure, they entered the 1980s as corrupt, anti-socialist and nationalist organizations, but they still generally sought, in the 1970s, to gain concessions *for* workers. Now the unions demanded concessions *from* workers.

Yet the factories continued to close, and the ranks of the unions thinned. It became necessary to find new sources of revenue and a new social basis for the union officials' existence. This the UAW has found in abundance.

The UAW played the instrumental role in imposing the Obama administration's “rescue” of the auto industry in 2009. This entailed the elimination of 35,000 jobs, the banning of strikes for six years, the gutting of benefits for retired autoworkers, and the driving down of wages by expanding the category of newly hired workers called “tier two,” in which the workers' pay, when adjusted for inflation, falls below what Henry Ford offered in his famous Five Dollar Day way back in 1914.

Obama and the investment bankers who head up his Auto Task Force saw to it that the UAW was given billions in corporate stock, and many billions more in VEBA trust funds. According to Wikipedia, the “UAW Retiree Medical Benefits Trust, with more than \$45 billion in assets as of June 2010, and \$58.8 billion as of March 2014, is the world's largest VEBA.”

The UAW and the rest of the AFL-CIO are preparing to hand over hundreds of millions of dollars in union dues to Democratic Party politicians once again. There is a tactical difference between the two big business parties. The Republican Party seeks the unmediated exploitation of the working class. The Democratic Party seeks to use the services of its union allies for the same end.

The current glad-handing “negotiations” between the UAW and the Big Three, carried out with workers left totally in the dark and with the promise of only more concessions, brings the unions to a new milepost in their transformation into anti-working class organizations.

It is as if a great historical experiment that began in the late 1930s has drawn to a close. Would it be possible to build a union movement on an explicitly pro-capitalist, anti-socialist and nationalist basis? History has delivered its verdict.

All the objective conditions exist for a break with the Democratic Party. It is now five decades since the last significant social reform in US history. Yet the political struggle against the union officials and their middle class acolytes continues.

History also shows that workers will be driven into struggle. As they did in the 1930s, they will wage strikes and create new forms of industrial organization. But the decisive battle will be fought in the arena of politics. Workers must build a socialist political movement that expresses their own interests, which are irreconcilably hostile to those of the capitalists and their parties.



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