

The political issues in the autoworkers' struggle

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A growing militancy and oppositional sentiment is spreading among autoworkers in the United States, a phenomenon with national and international implications. In recent days, anger has erupted over the efforts of the United Auto Workers to ram through a four-year labor agreement reached with Fiat Chrysler that will escalate the attack on workers' living standards and working conditions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter have received continuous messages and emails from outraged autoworkers denouncing the contract and the joint company-UAW conspiracy to extract even greater profits from the working class.

This opposition is not unique to autoworkers. It is a reflection of a deep anger over social inequality and the relentless drive by governments around the world to satisfy the demands of the global banks and corporations. Whether in Athens, Sao Paulo, London, Moscow or Detroit, workers around the world confront the same struggle.

For all of the claims by upper-middle class academics about the supposed end of the class struggle, American workers are chafing against the shackles of the corporatist trade unions. The class struggle, long suppressed, is beginning to erupt to the surface of social and political life in the United States. The sleeping giant of world politics, the American working class, is beginning to awake.

Autoworkers in the US are determined to resist the efforts by the UAW to force the contract through, using all manner of threats, lies and intimidation. However, the defeat of this sellout is only the first step in a broader and more complex struggle.

To conduct this struggle, more is needed than sheer determination and militancy, as critical as these are. Workers need a clearly thought out political strategy to

mobilize the broadest support of workers and youth throughout the United States and internationally. For this it is necessary to understand the political and social forces that are arrayed against the working class.

Workers correctly denounce UAW officials as corrupt company agents. However, lacking an understanding of the objective causes of the decades-long degeneration of the trade unions, many hold out the hope that the UAW can be reformed. This can be seen in a widely circulated open letter by a Fiat Chrysler worker calling for the rejection of the contract, which concludes with an appeal for UAW President Dennis Williams to "listen to your constituents," "remember which side you are on," and "do what a union is supposed to do."

In fact, the UAW long ago severed its ties with the traditions of the class struggle. It is not a "workers organization" susceptible to reform, but a company union. The UAW-Fiat Chrysler contract was signed by two business entities to maximize profits for the company while ensuring a portion of the spoils to the UAW in exchange for its role in suppressing the resistance of workers and imposing management's demands.

A principal concern of the UAW is the expansion of its health care business so that it can grow its multibillion-dollar trust fund, under conditions of dwindling membership and dues income. In return, the UAW has agreed to the establishment of a permanent lower wage for autoworkers and all sorts of schemes for speedup and further restructuring of the auto industry at the cost of tens of thousands of jobs.

The actions of the UAW are the result not simply of corrupt union officials. Its hostile relationship to the interests of the workers it claims to represent has deep historical roots. While the UAW was formed through bitter class battles led by socialists, the organization came to be dominated by a conservative and pro-capitalist bureaucracy that rejected the struggle against the profit

system and subordinated workers to the Democratic Party, thereby excluding any radical challenge to the domination of the economy by the corporate and financial elite. (See, “The UAW and the Democratic Party”)

While the consequences of these actions were temporarily concealed during the post-World War II boom, the devastating result was exposed by the late 1970s and 1980s, when American capitalism lost its world-dominant position. The ruling class dumped its policy of class compromise and embarked on a war to claw back every gain won by the working class. The UAW and trade unions as a whole responded to the growth of transnational production by abandoning any resistance and adopting the program of corporatism in the 1980s, which rejects the class struggle, advocates the so-called identity of interests of workers and corporations and completely subordinates the needs of workers to the profit demands of the companies.

Even before the unions completely integrated themselves into the structures of corporate management, they never challenged the capitalist system and the so-called right of the corporate and financial elite to privately own vast industries and financial resources, and to derive their profits from the appropriation of the surplus value created by the collective labor of the working class.

Autoworkers must break with the UAW and build new organizations of struggle, including rank-and-file action committees democratically controlled by the workers themselves. It is not a matter, however, of building “better unions,” but of developing a mass political struggle of the working class aimed at taking political power.

At the center of the UAW’s treachery is its subordination of the workers to capitalism, overseen by a political system that represents the interests of the ruling class. In discussions with autoworkers, several have expressed the view that going to the courts or the National Labor Relations Board would lead to the democratization of the UAW and improved representation for workers.

Bitter experience, however, has demonstrated that, far from defending workers, the government has repeatedly used state violence, court injunctions and mass arrests against working class struggles. The government is not a neutral body, but an instrument of the corporate and financial elite.

In the United States, both political parties, Democrats and Republicans, are united in their defense of the capitalist system. The Obama administration spearheaded the attack on autoworkers, including expanding the two-tier wage system and abolishing the eight-hour day, in

order to set the precedent for sweeping attacks on wages, pensions and health care throughout the economy. Any worker who holds out hope that the government will defend workers’ rights only has to look at the disgusting spectacle of the presidential race, composed of political hacks put forth by different billionaire oligarchs.

The allies of autoworkers are not the big business politicians, but the hundreds of millions of workers in the US and around the world who are facing the same battles and the same class enemies. In every country, workers are being forced to pay for the trillions that were handed to the financial criminals who caused the 2008 Wall Street crash and to inflate a new speculative bubble.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will do everything possible to assist workers in defeating the sellout agreement by the UAW. For the struggle of autoworkers to be successful, however, requires the mobilization of the entire working class, in the US and internationally, in a political counteroffensive to put an end to inequality and provide a future for the next generation free from poverty and war.

The defense of the most elemental rights—for a significant improvement in living standards, an end to the hated two-tier wage system, backbreaking speedup and work schedules, and for secure jobs, pensions and health benefits—pits workers against more than just Fiat Chrysler, the other auto companies and their agents in the UAW. It is driving them into a struggle against the entire economic and political system, which subordinates the needs of the working class to the profit interests of the owners of the banks and corporations.

The fight for the interests of the working class is the fight for socialism. It is the fight to end a system based on exploitation and inequality. It is a fight of the working class to take political power and reorganize the economy on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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