

Autoworkers' struggle at the crossroads

Jerry White

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The battle by autoworkers in the United States has reached a critical juncture. After Fiat Chrysler workers overwhelmingly defeated the contract pushed by the United Auto Workers earlier this month, the UAW has brought back another deal crafted to meet the strategic aims of the auto corporations and Wall Street.

No matter what the spin the UAW's PR firm puts on it, the new deal, like the first, would accelerate the descent of autoworkers—once among the highest-paid industrial workers in the world—into the ranks of the working poor.

The contract maintains the hated two-tier wage and benefit system and would establish a new permanently lower wage in the industry. In line with the Obama administration's policy of shifting health care costs onto workers, the agreement introduces the first-ever deductibles for older workers who refuse to accept inferior health plans. It paves the way, through continuing plans to establish a union-run "co-op," to end employer-paid benefits first won by autoworkers in the 1940s. (See, "UAW begins campaign to beat back opposition to second sellout at Fiat Chrysler")

From the beginning, the UAW has functioned as a hostile force in relationship to the demands of autoworkers. Rather than informing and uniting workers, it has kept its deliberations with management secret and done everything to wear down and beat workers into submission. While it calls itself a "union," in reality the UAW is a multibillion-dollar business entity, aligned with corporate management, whose sole interest is boosting its share of the profits taken out of the hides of workers.

The incipient rebellion by Fiat Chrysler workers has shown the fighting capacity of the working class and shattered the lying claims about the disappearance of the class struggle peddled by various apologists for the unions. The re-eruption of the class struggle has generated a growing interest in socialism and a political strategy for the working class, as seen in the popularity of the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. It has also generated expressions of global solidarity as demonstrated by the interviews on the WSWs from autoworkers in Canada, France, Australia, Germany and other countries.

The challenges autoworkers face are immense, but the forces they can mobilize among workers and youth in the US and around the world are more powerful. To carry out a successful struggle, however, autoworkers who are leading this fight have to have a clear understanding of the economic and political forces that they confront.

In the course of discussions with autoworkers, the issue of whether workers can reform the UAW has repeatedly come up. Some have proposed marching on the UAW's Solidarity House headquarters, taking the UAW to court or asserting other forms of

pressure to force the UAW to represent its members instead of the companies.

In judging whether or not such an effort is warranted, one has to examine what the UAW is and the social interests that it represents. The treachery of the UAW is not a new phenomenon. Since the early 1980s, when former UAW President Douglas Fraser was brought onto Chrysler's board of directors and the union adopted corporatism as its official doctrine, the UAW has worked systematically to suppress strikes, victimize militant workers and batter down the resistance of workers to plant closings, mass layoffs and a relentless attack on their living standards.

In response to its falling membership and dues base, the UAW bureaucracy sought out and found other sources of income to sustain its bloated apparatus and salaries. Over the last 35 years, literally billions of dollars have been funneled into joint labor-management real estate, investment and other corporatist schemes, as well as the UAW Retirees Medical Benefits Trust (the VEBA). This has left UAW executives with a direct financial incentive to increase the exploitation of autoworkers.

The same pattern has been followed by every union in the United States and internationally. That is why the source of the problem cannot be found simply in the cowardice and corruption of the UAW leaders. It lies in the pro-capitalist and nationalist character of the trade unions, which have proven incapable of answering in any progressive fashion the globalization of capitalist production and the crisis of American and world capitalism.

The claims that the unions can be reformed has been deliberately fostered by a host of mid-level UAW officials, including former UAW Local 1700 President Bill Parker, current UAW Local 551 Vice President Scott Houldieson and former New Directions supporter Gregg Shotwell. Organized in the so-called Autoworker Caravan group and backed by the publication *Labor Notes* and pseudo-left groups such as the International Socialist Organization, Workers World Party, Spark and Socialist Alternative, these forces insist that workers can "put the backbone back in the UAW" (in the words of Shotwell). They deliberately conceal the anti-working class character of this organization.

Such a perspective only reinforces the dictatorship of the UAW over workers and is aimed at smothering the independent initiative that was so powerfully demonstrated in the "no" vote campaign by rank-and-file workers.

What is needed is not fruitless and discouraging efforts to revive these dead organizations, but a determined struggle to build factory committees made up of the most conscious and courageous workers to mobilize the strength of the working class on the basis

of an entirely different political strategy.

Fiat Chrysler, GM and Ford are transnational corporations. CEOs like Sergio Marchionne are global players who view the fight against US autoworkers as one front in a battle that stretches over the international map.

Behind the auto bosses stand the Wall Street banks and other global financial institutions, which control the vast sums the automakers need to develop and produce vehicles in a brutally competitive world market. Able to make far higher returns through speculating on the global stock markets, these financial parasites are demanding a sharp increase in profit margins in order to funnel billions more into stock buybacks, dividends and interest payments to the top one percent.

With the general economic malaise in Europe and Latin America, a slowdown in China and an inevitable downturn in car sales in the US, the financial aristocracy is also demanding a further consolidation of the global auto industry to destroy “excess capacity,” i.e., hundreds of thousands of jobs, and drive workers into a more frenzied race to the bottom. This is what lies behind Marchionne’s plans for a mega-merger and the savage job and cost-cutting attack at VW, the world’s largest automaker, in the aftermath of the emissions scandal.

In discussions with autoworkers, some have suggested that they could defend their rights by appealing to Obama’s Labor Department or the courts. While the sense of injustice is entirely warranted, the fact is the Obama administration has led the way in trampling over autoworkers’ democratic and social rights.

During the 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler, the Obama administration lifted the caps on the percentage of second-tier workers, abolished overtime payments after eight hours, and handed the UAW retiree health care trust billions of dollars in corporate stocks as a reward. The joint conspiracy by the automakers and the UAW to further shift health care costs onto the backs of workers is being driven by Obama’s “Cadillac Tax” on higher-quality health care benefits.

The government and the two political parties are not neutral bodies but the tools of Wall Street. While bailing out the financial criminals responsible for crashing the economy, the Democrats and Republicans have waged a relentless war on the working class, gutting the jobs, living standards, pensions and vital social services for workers and their families.

The attack on autoworkers became the model for a “new normal” of poverty-level wages, permanent job insecurity and a return to conditions of industrial slavery and social inequality not seen in a century. Under Obama’s watch, wages have fallen to their lowest level as a share of the US economy since World War II, and the greatest transfer of wealth has occurred from the bottom to the top in US history.

Drunk with wealth and power, the American ruling class considers workers’ demands for the slightest improvement in their living standards to be fanciful. “If (UAW members) don’t vote for this, then their expectations are too unrealistic and I don’t know if they can get a contract at Chrysler,” said Art Schwartz, former GM negotiator and president of Labor and Economics Associates in Ann Arbor.

This only underscores the fact that the struggle for the most basic

social rights—a good paying and secure job, health care, pensions, a future for the next generation free from poverty and war—thrusts workers into a battle against the entire existing economic and political order. What is unrealistic is not the social rights of the working class but the continued domination of society by a criminal class of already super-rich bankers and corporate executives.

The UAW and other unions have spent decades seeking to eradicate the socialist traditions in the American working class. But it was socialists and other left-wing militants inspired by the Russian Revolution who led the Flint sit-down strikes and other mass struggles that established the UAW and other industrial unions in the 1930s. The beginning of the end of the American labor movement was the antisocialist purges in the late 1940s by then-UAW President Walter Reuther, an inveterate opportunist and right-wing social-democrat who was elected with the support of the Communist Party in 1946.

Dedicated to the defense of the capitalist system and a political alliance with the Democratic Party, the unions responded to the decline in the global position of American capitalism that began in the 1970s by aligning themselves ever more directly with corporate management. They now deny absolutely any “adversarial relationship” between workers and capitalists.

Socialism is based on a scientific understanding of the irreconcilable conflict between the working class, whose collective labor produces society’s wealth, and the capitalist owners who privately expropriate that wealth. It is based on the fundamental reality that the working class is an international class, which has no interests in defending the outmoded nation-state system and the fratricidal competition between workers, trade wars and shooting wars that it breeds.

The logic of the class struggle is the development of a powerful political movement of the international working class to take power in its own hands and put the industries and financial institutions under democratic and collective ownership. Only in this way can workers put an end to poverty and social inequality forever.

The autoworkers’ struggle is at a crossroads. To take it forward to the next stage, everything depends on the independent initiative of workers and their deepening understanding of the political challenges they face.



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