After the Fiat-Chrysler ratification: The way forward for autoworkers

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The announcement by the United Auto Workers that the contract with Fiat Chrysler (FCA) has been ratified by a majority of FCA workers sets the stage for the next round of the fight against the corporate-union-government conspiracy against the working class.

While any vote totals released by the UAW are inherently suspect, there was clearly a shift between the first proposed contract, which was rejected overwhelmingly by the workers, and the second. This was not due to a substantial improvement in the terms of the deal. The second contract preserves the main aims of the company, including a permanent lowering of the base pay of autoworkers through an extension of the two-tier wage and benefit system and the driving out of older, higher-paid workers. It also includes new concessions not contained in the first agreement, such as a doubling of the percentage of even lower-paid temporary workers.

The ratification vote is the product of a massive campaign of lies and intimidation carried out by the UAW and backed by the companies, the corporate media and the government. Thousands of workers who voted “yes” did not believe the UAW hype campaign organized by the New York-based PR firm BerlinRosen. They voted for what they knew to be a rotten deal because they had no confidence they could get a better agreement through the UAW. Without a clearly worked out alternative perspective and organization, they were vulnerable to the UAW’s economic blackmail and threats of job losses.

The ratification does not negate the historic fact that rank-and-file workers last month overwhelmingly voted down a national contract backed by the UAW—the first such contract rejection since 1982. The vote was an initial expression of the reemergence of the class struggle in the United States, which is taking the form of an incipient rebellion against the trade unions.

The deep anger building up in the working class will, sooner rather than later, erupt again. In the auto industry, the focus will now shift to General Motors and Ford, where the UAW will attempt to force through similar deals, adapted to the particular needs of these companies. The opening shot in the contract fight at GM—which the UAW has announced is next in line after FCA—was delivered on Friday with the announcement that the company will be laying off 500 workers at the Lake Orion assembly plant outside of Detroit.

FCA, meanwhile, will begin moving forward with plans to restructure its operations, including plant closings and layoffs. Beyond the auto industry, steelworkers have been laboring under an extended contract for nearly two months as the United Steelworkers conspires behind closed doors with the steel companies to freeze wages and slash health care costs. Similar conditions face tens of thousands of telecommunications workers, teachers, postal workers and other sections of the working class.

For autoworkers and the working class as a whole, the critical task is to assimilate the basic political lessons of the contract fight at FCA to prepare the next stage of the struggle.

It is first of all necessary to draw the requisite conclusions about the nature of the UAW and the trade unions in general. Even among many workers who bitterly denounced the UAW leadership, there remained the hope that the massive “no” vote on the first sellout deal would force the union to come back with something better. These hopes proved illusory. Even if the second contract had been voted down, the fight against the imposition of near-poverty wages and the destruction of pensions, health benefits and working conditions would not have been resolved. The company and the union would have redoubled their conspiracy.

There is an entire network of local union functionaries and “critics” who devote their energies to defending the organizational stranglehold of the UAW and the AFL-CIO. Groups such as Autoworker Caravan, backed by *Labor Notes*, *SocialistWorker* and other publications, insist that workers can make the UAW fight for them by applying pressure to the bureaucracy. They posture as opponents of the union leadership, but they are implacably hostile to any genuine expression of the democratic will of the workers in opposition to the union apparatus.

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As the experience at FCA has once again demonstrated, the UAW is not a "workers' organization," susceptible to pressure from its members. It is an arm of the corporations and the government, specifically tasked with suppressing the resistance of the workers. Not only the UAW, but the entire official union apparatus has worked for decades to prevent any struggle against the corporations and the banks. To the extent that the unions have their own agendas in relation to the companies, they concern the particular business interests of the well-off parasites who control them. Such, for example, is the UAW's drive to establish itself as a health insurance provider.

Throughout the contract fight, the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* campaigned for the formation of rank-and-file factory committees, a demand that has won widespread support. The fight for these committees must be deepened and expanded through the formation of independent organizations in every plant to unite GM, FCA and Ford workers; to establish lines of communication with autoworkers internationally; and to reach out to the entire working class.

For this struggle to be successful, it must be guided by a clear political perspective. Many of the thousands of workers who have followed the *Autoworker Newsletter* and its exposures of the contract and the role of the UAW have asked how it was possible for the WSWS to so clearly anticipate the course of events. The answer is that the analysis of the WSWS is rooted in an understanding of the political and economic framework within which the present struggle takes place.

The reactionary role of the unions is based on their pro-capitalist and nationalist perspective. Even at the height of the post-World War II boom, when workers were able to win significant gains through strikes and other forms of industrial action, the unions worked to subordinate the working class to the profit system. As American capitalism entered a period of long-term decline in the 1970s, the corporate and financial elite carried out a policy of deindustrialization and wealth redistribution from the bottom to the top. Everything that has been won by workers through bitter struggle is being ripped away, a process that has accelerated since the Wall Street meltdown of 2008.

The unions responded to these developments by integrating themselves ever more directly into the framework of corporate management. They reacted to the increasingly global character of production by seeking to pit workers of different countries against each other in a race to the bottom. Today, with social inequality higher than at any time since before the Great Depression, the unions insist that there is no "adversarial relationship" between the working class and the companies, even as they demand that workers "sacrifice" in order to boost the profitability and competitiveness of the companies in the US.

This is not a uniquely American phenomenon. In every country, the official, pro-capitalist unions have become the most bitter enemies of the working class.

The political form of the unions' support for the capitalist system in the US is their alliance with the Democratic Party. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, defend the interests of the ruling class. In the auto industry, the White House played the critical role in organizing the 2009 bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler, which was used to expand the two-tier wage and benefit system and implement other attacks on workers. While the Obama administration has not been openly involved in the current contract negotiations, it is no doubt in close discussion with both the UAW and the auto companies, ready to intervene—through "mediation" or, if that does not work, police repression—should the opposition of workers get out of hand.

The working class all over the world is coming into conflict with the capitalist system. The basic question is: In whose interests will society be run? In the interests of corporate executives and Wall Street investors? Or in the interests of the working class, the vast majority of the population? Will society continue to be subordinated to the profit demands of a money-mad financial aristocracy, or will the working class succeed in restructuring the world economy on a socialist basis, that is, according to social need rather than private profit?

The fundamental task is the development of the independent initiative, international organization and political independence of the working class, in opposition to the companies, the unions and the capitalist system. But this requires the building of a new socialist and revolutionary leadership in the working class. We urge all autoworkers and other workers who have followed and supported the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* to study the program of the Socialist Equality Party and make the decision to take up the fight for socialism.

For more information on joining the SEP, click here.

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