

The vote at Ford and the way forward for autoworkers

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Voting by 53,000 workers employed at Ford Motor Company in the US concludes today. The count going into the final day indicates that the contract may be defeated, with 52 percent voting “no” so far and only one major facility—the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan—still to be counted. Over the past several days there has been a significant shift in momentum, with major plants in Kentucky and Chicago, Illinois rejecting the deal by a two-to-one margin.

The United Auto Workers has responded to these developments with a combination of panic and bullying. Remaining workers voting today will confront on their way to the ballot box a gauntlet of UAW officials, with the mid-level careerists and aspiring executives threatening workers that if they reject the contract they will lose their jobs. One worker called the line-up the “green mile,” a reference to death row. Many workers are justifiably worried that the UAW will resort to ballot stuffing and vote rigging to secure a “correct” outcome.

Whether or not the UAW succeeds in securing or manufacturing a “yes” vote, the developments at Ford have once again exposed the unbridgeable gulf between the UAW and the workers it claims to represent. The wellspring of opposition against the contract, in the face of shameless lies and intimidation, also reveals the deep discontent in the working class, with implications that extend far beyond Ford and the Big Three auto companies.

Wednesday’s hastily called press conference, organized by UAW Vice President Jimmy Settles and UAW Local 600 President Bernie Ricke, provides another object lesson for workers on the nature of this organization. There was, first of all, the blocking of WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* reporters from attending the event and their forcible removal from the premises of a supposedly public press conference, topped off by the snatching of one of our reporters’ cell phones.

The UAW knows on what side its bread is buttered, and Settles looked on approvingly as the correspondents of corporate publications like the *Detroit News*, *Detroit Free Press* and other corporate-controlled media outlets were shepherded in while local officials manhandled the representatives of the one publication that has won a widespread following for telling the truth and giving voice to the anger and opposition of autoworkers.

At the press conference itself, analyzed in detail on the WSWs, Settles and Ricke alternatively lectured and hectorated workers, counting on the assembled journalists to faithfully transmit their patronizing, pro-company arguments. In both tone and content, the remarks of the UAW officials were virtually indistinguishable from what corporate management would have said.

Settles and Ricke were obsessed with concerns that workers are not sufficiently “educated” about the “process” of negotiations. Young workers “haven’t been through this process before,” Ricke complained. “They don’t understand the process,” Settles remarked. “We try to do the best we possibly can to educate them to the process.” He added that “social media” was creating a “problem” for the UAW because workers were spreading “negative things” and what Settles insisted on calling “misnomers” propagated by “other folks”—i.e., the WSWs.

Elaborating on what he meant by the “process,” Settles said that “part of the education process” is to explain why no company could have “a real advantage over another company.” The problem is that “younger workers don’t understand if Ford pays more than everybody else they would be at a disadvantage with the rest of the companies.” Ricke concluded by warning workers just because “the company [is] making billions of dollars”—after slashing labor costs in half—workers should not expect a significant increase in their wages or benefits. “It is our job to educate them about the delicate

balance.”

According to the UAW, the correct “process” is supposed to be: The company dictates the contract based on what it needs to expand its profits; the UAW signs off on these demands; and the membership, properly “educated” by the UAW, ratifies the agreement.

The problem for the UAW, the auto companies and the ruling class as a whole is that workers are refusing to go along with it. First there was the rejection of the contract at Fiat Chrysler, the first time in 32 years that workers shot down a national agreement backed by the UAW. The UAW responded by presenting the same contract slightly reworded for a second vote, pushing it through with a combination of threats and blackmail. Then there was the close vote at General Motors and the rejection of the contract by skilled trades workers. Local UAW-GM officials are meeting today to reach agreement on how they plan to ram the deal through in violation of the UAW’s own constitutional bylaws.

Now there is the mass opposition at Ford. Among the UAW executives there is concern that its failure to perform its assigned tasks will cause it to lose the favor of the corporations and the state. One headline published today by *Forbes* gave voice to the frustration of the ruling class: “A weakened and divided UAW struggles to get workers to march in step,” the pro-business publication complained. Determined to defend the lavish perks and positions that go along with its role as a corporate-labor syndicate, the UAW lashes out with fury at workers who are not toeing the line.

For the working class, basic questions of perspective are posed. By refusing to “march in step,” autoworkers are giving expression not only to the anger among the autoworkers themselves and opposition to the UAW-corporate contracts, but to a deep and widespread sentiment for a fight in the working class as a whole.

Younger workers—the particular target of Settles and Riche—face a future of poverty-level wages, indebtedness and permanent economic insecurity. Older workers have endured more than a decade of stagnant wages and are seeing the prospect of a decent retirement and adequate health care ripped away. Internationally, the same conditions prevail. Today, Volkswagen is expected to announce plans for massive layoffs and factory closings in the wake of the company’s criminal actions in the emissions scandal. Everywhere, workers are being told that their basic rights are unaffordable.

The assault on the working class has the full backing of the government, the bought-and-controlled instrument of

class rule. During the so-called “recovery” of the Obama administration, 95 percent of all income gains have gone to the top one percent, and the candidate of “change” has funneled trillions into the stock markets and overseen the restructuring of class relations, including through the 2009 bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler. While it has yet to intervene directly in the auto contract battle, the Obama administration will quickly step in if the opposition of workers escapes the control of its agents in the UAW.

The working class is beginning to fight back, and workers must prepare for a period of immense struggle. Autoworkers at Ford should vote “no” on the contract, but those organizations that claim such a vote will force the UAW back to the negotiating table to win a better contract are perpetuating a conscious fraud. By its own words and actions, the UAW has proven it will do nothing of the sort. There is not an ounce of democracy in this organization, or in the so-called unions as a whole.

Based on an understanding of the anti-working class character of these organizations, the WSWS and the *Autoworker Newsletter* have called for the formation of independent rank-and-file factory committees to coordinate action and organize opposition. Meetings of all workers should be organized to discuss the way forward outside of the prying eyes of the company spies in the UAW. An appeal should be made to autoworkers throughout the US, Canada and in Mexico, Europe, Asia and around the world, for the opening of a common struggle against the global companies. The struggle of autoworkers must be linked up to the fight of steelworkers, teachers, telecom workers and other sections of the working class facing the same attack.

The organization of opposition in the factories must be combined with the building of a political movement of the international working class in opposition to the capitalist profit system. The rotten treachery of the UAW is rooted above all in its absolute defense of capitalism, an economic system based on the exploitation of the working class for the profit of the banks and corporations. As the struggle of the working class develops, in the United States and internationally, it must and will take on an increasingly overt political form against the dictatorship of the corporate and financial elite.



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