

Lessons of the autoworkers' battle

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The claim by the United Auto Workers that it eked out a 51 percent “yes” vote at Ford is the capstone to a contract process that has exposed the limitless lying, fraud and gangster-like methods of this corporate-labor syndicate.

The auto bosses prevailed in forcing through pro-corporate deals at the Big Three not because workers lacked determination or resilience. On the contrary, throughout the two-month-long battle—which included the first defeat of a national contract backed by the UAW in 32 years (Fiat Chrysler), a split vote (General Motors) and a dubious 51 percent ratification (Ford)—autoworkers have demonstrated their tenacity to struggle and their incredible ingenuity.

The ability of the companies to overcome the widespread opposition of the 140,000 autoworkers was due to the deliberate sabotage of the UAW, which from day one waged a relentless war not against Ford, GM and FCA, but against the workers the UAW falsely claims to represent.

On the eve of the Ford Rouge vote, the UAW held a hastily-called press conference at the Dearborn local union, where a UAW Vice President James Settles told the pro-corporate media that “things looked dark” but that they “might look brighter in the morning.” He denounced young workers in particular for making wage demands that would put Ford at a “competitive disadvantage.” A rejection of the pact would lead Ford to close plants or would force the UAW to call a strike, which Settles warned would result in financial ruin for workers or their replacement by scabs.

Fearing any opposition to its conspiracy with the auto companies, the UAW barred WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* reporters from the press conference and forcibly removed them. The thuggish behavior was then meted out to Ford Rouge workers the next day. Workers reported that they were forced to walk through a gauntlet of local UAW officials to vote at the union hall, while UAW committeemen took to the shop floor with ballots in hand to pressure recalcitrant workers to vote “yes.”

Late on Friday, the UAW announced that it had miraculously achieved a 74 percent approval by Ford Rouge workers giving it the necessary 51 percent nationally to ratify the deal. Workers replied with anger, charging the UAW with vote rigging and demanding a recount, a demand

that has been ignored by the UAW and the media. The UAW was “lawless and back stabbing,” “a bunch of scabs,” and no better than the “Mafia,” workers exclaimed.

The same day, the UAW ran roughshod over its own constitutional bylaws and ratified the GM deal, even though 60 percent of skilled workers rejected it two weeks ago.

With consummate cynicism, UAW Ford Vice President Settles declared Friday night, “There is no higher authority than the membership. Through a fair and democratic process UAW-Ford members have delivered job security and strong economic gains for their families and communities.”

In fact, the whole experience has shown that the UAW is completely unaccountable to workers and impervious to their needs. It resorted to extreme measures because it was impossible to attain a majority for deals that workers clearly understood would only deliver “strong economic gains” to the corporations and their UAW henchmen.

UAW-backed concessions over the last decade have reduced the per-vehicle costs to a minuscule 7 percent, allowing the auto companies to amass tens of billions in profits and to squander billions on executive bonuses and stock buybacks and dividend payments to their richest Wall Street investors.

The new deals will lead to an almost negligible increase in hourly labor costs over the next four years. By eliminating all caps on second-tier workers (now dubbed “in progression”), they pave the way for the establishment of a permanently lower wage and benefit scale after older, higher-paid workers are driven out of the industry. The UAW will also be further integrated into the structure of corporate management under a “living agreement,” which can be modified at any time to slash the jobs, wages and benefits of workers.

The corporate executives and the UAW are celebrating... for now. Gushing over the conclusion of the vote, the *Detroit Free Press* wrote, “With the new contracts in place, GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles can look forward to four years of labor peace and prosperity as the industry heads to record US sales and healthy profits margins.”

Having barely survived a rebellion, a UAW Local 600 bureaucrat at Ford Rouge told campaigners from the WSWs

Autoworker Newsletter on Saturday, “You might as well go home. The vote is over and we won.” The “we,” of course, refers to the UAW and the company, not the workers.

A Pyrrhic victory! Such boasts and celebrations of “labor peace” are wishful thinking at best. Many more struggles will follow—of autoworkers as the terms of the agreement are implemented, and of other sections of the working class as the ruling class targets them. As for the UAW, its resort to bullying and fraud has only further discredited this deeply hated organization, while teaching large numbers of workers that the only way they will be able to defend their interests is by casting off the dead weight of this reactionary, pro-company organization.

As far as the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* “going home” there is not a chance! The work of the *WSWS* and the Socialist Equality Party in helping workers build an opposition to the companies and their UAW accomplices will become even more systematic and intense. Now that the UAW and the auto companies have ratcheted up their efforts to convert the auto plants into industrial prisons, the need for an organized opposition—militant, class-conscious and responsive to the needs of the rank-and-file and subject to their democratic control—is greater than ever.

The auto contract struggle has demonstrated once again that the trade unions function as vital props of the corporate and political establishment in suppressing the class struggle and imposing the dictates of the financial aristocracy. Just as every other institution of bourgeois democracy has been hollowed out under the weight of class tensions and unprecedented levels of social inequality, so has the institution of “collective bargaining.” Far from giving workers a democratic voice to assert their interests, the “negotiations” between the so-called unions and the corporations are nothing but a conspiracy to suppress the aspirations of the working class.

The decades-long degeneration of the UAW and the other unions in the US—a phenomena that is repeated in other countries throughout the world—has its roots in the pro-capitalist and nationalist programs of the trade unions and their political subordination of the working class to the big business parties. Even at the height of the influence of the trade unions in the post-war period, they worked to shackle the working class to the capitalist system and the Democratic Party.

The globalization of production and the historic crisis of American capitalism pulled the rug from underneath the national reformist program of the trade unions. By the 1980s and 1990s, the unions had abandoned any resistance to the demands of the corporations, while the upper-middle class bureaucrats that ran them secured their interests by joining corporate boards and receiving billions in cash transfers to

do the bidding of big business.

The experience of the last few months has also exposed those who promote the myth that the UAW can be pressured, through “no” votes on their own, to take up a fight against the auto companies on behalf of workers. The UAW is not a workers’ organization susceptible to pressure from below, but a labor-corporate syndicate with business interests that are entirely hostile to workers.

As early as 1993, the Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, wrote that it “rejects entirely the idea that the AFL-CIO, as the organizational expression of the interests of the labor bureaucracy, can be ‘captured’ and turned into an instrument of revolutionary struggle.” The aim of our work, we explained, was not the “reform” of the UAW and AFL-CIO but “the destruction of its political influence and organizational control over the captive members.”

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* has been guided by this perspective and the struggle for an alternative program: the fight for the international unity of the working class, its political independence from the big business parties and the socialist transformation of society, including placing the global auto industry and the banks under the collective and democratic ownership of the working class.

The months-long battle of the autoworkers foreshadows the reemergence of mass class conflict in the United States and internationally. New forms of genuinely democratic and self-representative organizations of the working class, including the factory committees fought for by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, will emerge as means for the working class to defend its interests.

The corruption of every institution of capitalist society and their imperviousness to the interests of the vast majority of the population only means that the fight to defend the most elemental needs of the working class will thrust them into a revolutionary struggle directed at the entire economic order.



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