

UAW President Dennis Williams denounces role of “outside groups” in 2015 auto contract negotiations

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At his first press conference since ramming through contracts at the Big Three in the US last year, United Auto Workers President Dennis Williams expressed nervousness about the signs of militancy and social anger building up in the working class.

In pushing through pro-company deals at Ford, Fiat Chrysler (FCA) and General Motors in 2015, the UAW faced a rebellion from rank-and-file auto workers. After FCA workers decisively rejected the first contract, the UAW responded by escalating its campaign of lies and intimidation. Despite these efforts, only with great difficulty did the union succeed in concluding the ratification process which included a rigged vote to get the deal through at Ford.

Then, in December, auto parts workers at Nexteer Automotive near Saginaw, Michigan, voted down a UAW-negotiated tentative agreement by a 97 percent margin, forcing the UAW to call a one-day strike, a stunt that was called off nearly as soon as it began. Again responding with a barrage of lies and threats, the UAW finally secured ratification.

During a “roundtable” last week with representatives of the corporate media at UAW headquarters, Williams spoke at length on the lessons of the 2015 contract negotiations, as well as the lead poisoning crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the ongoing protests by Detroit teachers and students.

In response to a question about the contract negotiations, the UAW president launched into a lengthy tirade. He attacked the role of social media and “outside groups” in helping give conscious voice to the opposition of workers.

“There is a new dimension to contract negotiations,” Williams said. “Social media plays a big role today.

There were a lot of things we learned about how to roll out an agreement to our membership and how we get the information to them so they can ask the right questions rather than getting information from people who really don’t know.

“I think there was another lesson learned ... [is] we need to do a better job in rolling out the tentative agreement and also that we were not prepared for the outside forces that attacked us on social media ...”

He continued, “We understand that there are people who have never voted for any agreement and will always attack agreements. ... What we weren’t used to is were the attacks from outside groups that have nothing to do with the UAW membership, have nothing to do with the process. We weren’t prepared for that, and we did get prepared during the process.”

While not naming it, Williams was referring to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, which throughout the contract struggle provided workers with the truth and exposed the lies of the UAW and the auto companies.

What worries Williams and the UAW—along with the corporate establishment and its bought-and-paid-for media outfits—is that workers refused to go along with the “process” set out by the union. Instead, autoworkers began communicating between themselves, using social media to expose the content of the contracts and organize opposition.

Thousands of autoworkers signed up for the online *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and relied on it as a source of information every day. The *Autoworkers Newsletter* explained the conspiracy by the corporations, the UAW and the media against the workers. It revealed the broader political issues to

workers and related the struggle of autoworkers to the fight to mobilize all sections of the working class in a common struggle against the corporations and their political representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

A critical component of the perspective advanced by the WSWS was the call to form rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the UAW. This call won widespread support, a reflection of the growing hostility of workers to the unions which function as pro-corporate syndicates and labor contractors.

The UAW responded, as Williams indicates, with its own “preparations.” Following the rejection vote by FCA workers, the UAW hired a PR firm and repackaged its original sellout deal. It instigated a red baiting campaign against the WSWS and sent goons out to harass WSWS supporters. It threatened workers that their jobs were in danger if they voted against ratification.

Under these conditions, the UAW is now desperately seeking to restore its credibility.

Thus, at the press conference, while gloating over record auto company profits and putting forward his typical rant about “unfair trade,” the UAW president referred to recent events in Flint and Detroit, calling them areas of concern for the UAW. The past month has seen Detroit teachers organizing job actions over horrible conditions in the schools in defiance of their union, the Detroit Federation of Teachers. Meanwhile, residents of Flint, Michigan, are mounting protests against local, state and federal authorities who covered up the lead poisoning of 100,000 people in the city.

Williams feigned concern for the residents of Flint, calling their situation “morally criminal.” He also criticized Michigan’s Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the state legislature for their provocative attempt to victimize protesting Detroit teachers by making sickouts illegal. In doing so, he participated in the cover-up of the role of local Democrats and the Obama administration which have played a central role in both the Flint crisis and the Detroit bankruptcy.

“Here we are with a crisis in Flint, and they attack teachers who are bringing attention to the problems in our schools in Detroit,” Williams said. “I’ve seen the pictures, deplorable conditions, floors coming up, not getting the books they need to be educated ...”

What concerns Williams is not just that the

Republican Snyder administration is being discredited by the crisis in Detroit and Flint, but that the entire political structure in the US, including the Democratic Party and the trade unions, are losing their credibility and their ability to block the emergence of struggles by the working class.

Indeed, Williams concluded the press conference with the following warning: “People are getting fed up with this system. It is not just by chance people are angry ... They feel disenfranchised as Republicans, they feel disenfranchised as Democrats and people are looking at alternatives to get something done ...”

The “alternative” he clearly fears are the “outside forces,” i.e. socialists armed with an anti-capitalist program, who are gaining a hearing among workers being radicalized by the social crisis. His concern is that, as in the case of the 2015 auto contract struggle, socialists will find a receptive response among teachers, residents of Flint and workers across the United States, and impart to the emerging struggles a revolutionary direction.

More and more workers are realizing the commonality of their struggles and searching for a perspective on which to base their fight. Conditions are being created for uniting together the various sectional struggles of the working class into one politically conscious mass movement against the capitalist system. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* are providing the program and leadership that is required for that fight.



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