

In Detroit visit, Sanders promotes the UAW and economic nationalism

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After speaking at a rally at Eastern Michigan University Monday afternoon, Bernie Sanders, candidate for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, visited United Auto Workers Local 600 in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn. The event drew a crowd of workers, as well as local youth from the largely Arabic and Latino nearby neighborhoods.

Sanders' selection of the UAW union hall—and in particular, Local 600—for his remarks is of some significance. Only three months before, 140,000 autoworkers, including 52,000 workers at Ford, were locked in a battle not only against the giant automakers but the UAW itself. The UAW was only able to push through pro-company labor agreements at Fiat Chrysler, GM and Ford by resorting to lies, intimidation and outright fraud.

With the contract facing defeat by Ford workers nationally, UAW Vice President Jimmy Settles and local president Bernie Ricke called an unprecedented mid-ratification press conference to bully the local's 8,000 workers with threats of mass layoffs and factory closings. UAW Local 600 officials physically barred reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* from the November 18 press conference and seized a reporter's cell phone.

Two days later, the UAW claimed that a majority of Local 600 workers had approved the sellout agreement, giving the UAW the necessary razor-thin majority to declare that it had been ratified nationally. Ford workers replied by denouncing Local 600 officials as “gangsters” and accusing them of stuffing the ballot and rigging the vote.

While in November they barred reporters from the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*—which was at the center of rank-and-file opposition to the UAW-corporate conspiracy—the UAW welcomed Bernie Sanders with open arms Monday night. Local 600 President Bernie Ricke gave the Vermont senator a warm introduction,

saying Sanders was committed to “social and economic justice” and knows that “collective bargaining created the middle class.”

The Sanders campaign has been viewed with interest by workers and young people due to his focus on issues of economic inequality and the domination of what he calls the “billionaire class.” However, he is neither a socialist nor a friend of the working class.

Like other Democrats, Sanders has a long history of promoting the trade union bureaucracy, which functions as a partner of the capitalist class, grabbing its own share of the profits from the greater exploitation of the working class. During the fall months, Sanders remained completely silent while the UAW ran roughshod over the democratic will of workers and imposed a deal that maintains the hated two-tier wage and benefit system, continues the decade-long decline in real wages for traditional workers and imposes first ever out-of-pocket health care costs on them.

In his remarks, Sanders praised the UAW, saying, “I think the American people have forgotten all we owe to the trade unions and to the UAW and its struggles.” Pointing to the historical photographs on the walls of the union hall, he referred to the “lessons of the trade union movement,” that “workers are not animals” but are “entitled to human rights.”

In fact, the UAW long ago abandoned any connection to the militant traditions of the genuine socialists who built the union during the sit-down strikes and mass struggles of the 1930s. Today, it is the UAW that treats workers like “animals,” ignoring their grievances and enforcing speedup, low wages and management's dictatorial regime in the factories.

What brings the UAW and Sanders together? Like the rest of the Democratic Party, Sanders understands that the unions play a critical role in containing and suppressing the class struggle and keeping political opposition bottled

up within the Democratic Party. After more than seven years of the Obama administration—during which time workers have seen only declining real wages, relentless attacks on social programs, endless wars and government spying and other antidemocratic measures—the Democratic Party has been deeply discredited.

The aim of the Sanders' campaign and its rhetoric about a "rigged economy" and "corrupt political system" is to rebrand the Democrats and prevent workers from breaking with this big-business party and fighting for far more radical, i.e., genuinely anti-capitalist and socialist solutions, to their problems.

The UAW and other unions are particularly attracted to Sanders because of his promotion of economic nationalism. During the UAW rally he claimed that the destruction of the jobs and living standards of American workers was due not to the capitalist system, but "unfair trade agreements" and "unpatriotic" companies that shifted production to China, Mexico and other low-wage countries.

The "working class and middle class is disappearing. We don't need unfettered trade. We need fair trade," he told the crowd, adding, "Republicans and big business loved NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement]. I was on the picket line in 1992 against NAFTA." He also denounced the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal.

Asserting that "bad" trade deals had led to the shutdown of 60,000 factories in America since 2001, Sanders declared, "We are going to rebuild our manufacturing base, corporate America is going to invest in this country, not just in China."

Sanders cited an employer who had decided to stay in the US because "American wages are becoming competitive with underdeveloped countries." He added, "Today, wages for young workers are sometimes 50 percent lower than that of older workers" describing the situation as a "race to the bottom."

What Sanders did not say was that the UAW has played a central role in facilitating this wage cutting. It has promoted the "growth" strategy of the Obama administration, which involves efforts to convince manufacturers to "in-source" operations back to the US by lowering costs, simultaneously increasing the amount of dues money in the UAW's bank accounts.

This began in earnest with Obama's 2009 restructuring of the auto industry, which halved the wages of new hires, eliminated the eight-hour day and allowed the auto giants to dump their retiree health care obligations. In exchange,

the UAW was given control of a multibillion-dollar retiree health care trust, which has been a lucrative investment vehicle for the executives who run the corporate entity known as the UAW.

While Sanders criticized the lead poisoning of Flint residents, he covered up the role of the UAW, which collaborated with GM to reduce hourly employment in the city from 80,000 in 1979 to less than 10,000 today. Obama's bailout of GM also gave GM immunity from lawsuits stemming from the spread of toxic pollutants, including into the Flint River.

The promotion of economic nationalism is aimed at cutting across the struggle to unify American workers with their brothers and sisters throughout the world in a common fight against the global auto giants and the world capitalist system. Nationalist poison has long been the stock-in-trade of the US trade unions. While peddling its "Buy American" and anti-Japanese, anti-Mexican rhetoric, the UAW has collaborated with the auto bosses to shut down hundreds of factories and slash the wages of workers.

Both Sanders and the UAW promote nationalism and economic protectionism in order to tie workers to the interests of their "own" capitalists and their ruthless competition over profits and market share. The logic of this is not only trade war but a shooting war with workers sent to slaughter each other over which nationalist clique of billionaires will dominate the world.

While calling himself a "democratic socialist," Sanders accepts and defends the capitalist profit system. He is opposed to the development of a political movement of the working class, in the United States and internationally, against the private ownership of banks and major industries by the corporate and financial elite. This, however, is precisely what is needed.



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