

1937: When Canadian and US autoworkers fought together

Roger Jordan
20 October 2016

More than 20,000 Canadian autoworkers at Ford, GM, and Chrysler are currently engaged in a bitter struggle to defend their jobs and working conditions as the Detroit Three, with the full support of the Unifor bureaucracy, seeks to ram through yet another round of concessions in the name of guaranteeing “investment” and “job security.”

For over three decades, Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, like the US-based United Auto Workers, have sabotaged every attempt by workers to fight back against wave after wave of wage and benefit cuts, plant shutdowns, the gutting of work rules and pension benefits, and the institution of a low-wage, multi-tier workforce.

Mounting a counteroffensive against the auto bosses and their union lackeys demands that workers draw on the experiences of decades of struggles. These include not only bitter defeats and betrayals, but also heroic class battles driven by the rebellious, and in the 1930s even incipiently revolutionary, impulses of rank-and-file workers. One such struggle, which contains critical lessons for today, was the 1937 strike by GM workers in Oshawa, which marked a turning point in the development of industrial unionism in Canada.

The strike which broke out at GM’s Oshawa facilities on April 8, 1937 was driven by, and part of, an international upsurge of the working class. The GM Canada workers were inspired by the actions of their brothers and sisters in the United States, who in the months prior to the Oshawa walkout had led the famous 44-day sit-down strike at the center of GM’s operations in Flint, Michigan. The Flint victory precipitated an eruption of working class struggles across the US and a rapid growth in the ranks of the recently established UAW.

There were 477 sit-down strikes in the US during 1937 alone, involving an estimated 500,000 workers. Canada’s first UAW local, Local 195 at Kelsey Wheel in Windsor, was chartered on December 9, 1936, after workers held Canada’s first recorded sit-down strike.

The sit-down strikes, in turn, emerged out of an unprecedented upsurge of the American working class, beginning with three general strikes in Minneapolis, San Francisco and Toledo in 1934, and a radicalization of workers internationally that found expression in the Spanish revolution of 1936 and the French general strike of the same year. Socialist-minded workers, including members of the Socialist and Communist Parties and the Trotskyist movement, played the leading role in these working class battles. The working class upsurge across the US and Canada could only develop through a rebellion against the conservative, craft-based American Federation of Labor (AFL) and, its Canadian counterpart, the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), and the foundation of a new organization in 1935, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, or CIO.

From Flint to Oshawa

It was in this climate that 200 sheet metal workers downed tools at GM’s facilities in Oshawa on February 15, 1937, in response to GM’s decision to increase production from 27 to 32 units. GM’s speed-up campaign was almost certainly an attempt to offset some of the production losses due to the Flint sit-down strike. Although it was the immediate trigger for the dispute, workers were also outraged by the wage cuts the company had imposed in late 1936 even though it was raking in record profits, not to mention the generally miserable working conditions and constant threat of layoffs. Real wages were 20 percent lower in 1937 than they had been in the 1920s.

The strikers made an appeal to the UAW in Detroit for support and in the following days Hugh Thompson, a UAW organizer, was sent to Oshawa to aid in the conduct of the struggle. Workers initially returned to their jobs after being advised to do so by Thompson, who began signing up workers to the UAW. The organizing drive quickly spread to other businesses in the city, with workers from outside the auto industry also joining.

The appeal to the UAW in Detroit was no mere tactical decision. It was motivated by the long-standing and widespread conviction that Canadian and US workers had common interests. Ever since the emergence of the Knights of Labor in the 1870s, militant working class movements had quickly crossed the Canada-US border. This was true of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) in the early 20th century and of the industrial unions that emerged in the 1930s.

In early April 1937, with GM refusing to recognize the UAW and the provincial Liberal government of Mitch Hepburn fully backing the company, the 4,000 Oshawa GM workers voted for strike action. Their demands included recognition of the UAW as the official bargaining agent, an 8-hour day, a 40-hour work week, seniority rights and a steward and grievance committee.

In the face of a militant struggle in a major industrial center only a short distance from Toronto, and the burgeoning threat of a North America-wide working class upsurge, GM and the Ontario Liberals sought to sow divisions by stoking reactionary Canadian nationalism. GM justified its refusal to recognize the UAW by describing their leaders as “foreign paid agitators,” a description seconded by the Liberal Premier Hepburn who railed against the union as foreign-dominated and un-Canadian.

In December 1936, just months before the strike, Hepburn had denounced the CIO for “dominating and dictating to Canadian industry,” adding, “After reviewing the activities of those foreign agitators and the chaos created by them in the United States, I am satisfied that the policy as dictated by them will be one of ever-increasing and impossible demands, culminating in the course of time in the entire loss of the tremendous and ever-increasing export trade now being enjoyed by the automobile industry of Ontario.”

The provincial Liberal government also took steps to ruthlessly suppress the strike. Hepburn organized a volunteer anti-strike police force of some 300 to 400, comprised of police officers, war veterans and university

students for the explicit purpose of violently breaking the strike. The deployment of this force, which the strikers derisively nicknamed “Hepburn’s Hussars,” was prevented by the solidarity among the striking workers in Oshawa, the rallying of support from working people in Oshawa and Toronto, and the ruling class fear that a direct clash would provoke a much broader working class rebellion.

Mass meetings and rallies were held in Oshawa, including a 5,000-strong demonstration in the city, which had a total population of just 25,000 at the time. Farmers and small business owners provided food and credit to striking workers.

The success of the 1937 strike, which saw the GM workers secure their main demands after a two-week struggle, flowed from the revolutionary spirit and militancy of the workers, guided by an instinctive internationalism that sought to link the battles being waged against the capitalist bosses and their state by workers in Canada with similar struggles in the US and beyond. Although GM refused to formally recognize the UAW in the agreement that ended the strike on April 23, in practice the UAW local negotiated on behalf of the workforce.

The mass upsurge of workers across the US and Canada in the mid-1930s was ultimately suppressed politically by the industrial union leaderships, aided and abetted by the Stalinist Communist parties. The CIO maintained the subordination of the working class to the political representatives of big business, to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party in the United States and to the Liberals in Canada. With their “Popular Front” policy, which claimed that in the interests of fighting fascism workers had to support the “progressive capitalists,” the Stalinist Communist parties assisted the unions in preventing the working class upsurge from becoming a political struggle against capitalism as a whole.

In the decades that followed, the unions shifted sharply to the right. Fully wedded to the capitalist profit system, the UAW became a bulwark of the Democratic Party and in Canada maintained the political subordination of the working class to the Liberals and the reformist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and its New Democratic Party (NDP) successor.

In tandem with the union bureaucracy in the US, the Canadian unions mounted a vicious purge of socialists and left-wing militants at the beginning of the Cold War and promoted a virulent, pro-imperialist nationalism and anti-communism.

The break-up of the UAW along nationalist lines

Under conditions of the post-war boom, the unions were able to secure limited material benefit for workers, while politically policing the working class. But by the late 1970s they were in ever-increasing crisis. They had no progressive response to the globalization of production, which brought to an end any possibility of securing limited improvements for workers within the framework of the nation state, and to the offensive launched by the ruling elite against the working class as personified by the emergence of Reagan and Thatcher.

In the years that followed, they systematically repudiated any tradition of working class struggle, embraced a corporatist perspective in which workers’ interests are wholly identified with and subordinated to those of capitalist investors, and sought to secure their privileges by joining union-management committees and acting as enforcers of concessions and job cuts.

The United Auto Workers spearheaded this development. In the US, the bureaucracy promoted reactionary “buy American” nationalism and were willing accomplices in downsizing and attacks on wages and working conditions. During the Chrysler bankruptcy of 1979, the UAW organized

plant shutdowns, the destruction of thousands of union jobs and unprecedented wage cuts, while UAW President Douglas Fraser took a seat on Chrysler’s Board of Directors.

In Canada, when workers rebelled against the concessions policy of the UAW Solidarity House leadership, the Canadian wing of the UAW, under the leadership of Bob White, worked to contain and suppress the opposition by diverting it along nationalist lines. Although US workers lobbied the Canadian UAW leadership to launch an appeal to US workers for a joint struggle against concessions, White was adamant in his opposition. He insisted that the issue was one of nationality, not the common class interests of autoworkers on both sides of the border.

Relying on reactionary anti-working class arguments that in their essentials were no different than those put forward by the bosses and capitalist politicians in the 1930s, White advanced the fraudulent claim that Canadian autoworkers needed their own separate organization and that their jobs and wages could only be defended on the basis of a nationalist perspective. In 1985, the Canadian UAW leadership split the international union to form the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), repudiating, just as the UAW was doing, the militant traditions of the union’s birth.

At the CAW’s founding, White claimed it would be more militant than the pro-corporate unionism practiced by the UAW south of the border. Instead, the CAW’s nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective paved the way for one round of concessions after another, as the UAW and CAW systematically pitted US and Canadian workers against each other in a race to the bottom that continues to this day.

Canadian autoworkers at GM, Ford and Chrysler can take forward their struggle against the assault being waged on their jobs and working conditions by corporate management and their union accomplices only if they repudiate this nationalist outlook. The internationalist traditions of the 1930s, when Canadian and US autoworkers saw their fates bound together, must be revived and further developed.

This cannot be carried out by any faction of the trade union bureaucracy, but must be fought for by workers in irreconcilable struggle against the pro-corporate Unifor. Above all, the heroic struggles of the 1930s demonstrate the necessity for workers to build their own party, based on a socialist program, to mobilize workers in the auto industry, unite them with their class brothers and sisters across Canada and internationally, and provide political leadership in their struggle against the auto corporations and capitalist elite as a whole.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact