

Harley-Davidson execs, union leaders meet with Trump at the White House

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President Donald Trump held a White House luncheon Thursday with corporate executives and union officials from the Wisconsin-based motorcycle manufacturer Harley-Davidson. At a press conference after the meeting, Trump repeated his claim that trade war measures and relieving US corporations of virtually all safety, environmental and labor regulations would be a boon for American workers.

Trump had originally been scheduled to tour the company's Milwaukee-area factory and sign further executive orders. However, some workers at the factory, hostile to Trump and angered by the planned visit, contacted a local protest group, which threatened to hold a demonstration at the factory against Trump's anti-immigrant measures. The White House cancelled the event after company officials expressed concern about the protests.

With his billionaire commerce secretary nominee, Wilbur Ross, at his side, Trump said, "Thank you Harley-Davidson for building things in America. ... We want to make it easier for businesses to create more jobs and more factories in the United States ... that means making America the best country on earth to do business ... we are re-doing NAFTA and a lot of our trade deals, and we're negotiating properly with countries—even countries that are allies—a lot of people are taking advantage of us, a lot of countries are terribly taking advantage of us."

These comments followed Trump's provocations against Mexico and accusations by his top trade adviser, Peter Navarro, that Germany was manipulating the value of the euro to "exploit" both its EU partners and the United States.

Trump denounced an agreement signed by the Obama administration to accept political refugees currently held in Australian detention camps, saying these were "illegal immigrants," a problem "steelworkers could understand." The new administration, he declared, "will have

allegiance to American workers and American companies."

The threats of trade war go hand in hand with slashing corporate tax rates and regulations.

Last week Trump told top executives from Ford, US Steel, Dow Chemical, Lockheed Martin and other corporations that he would eliminate "75 percent or more" of the regulations they currently face, and to reduce the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 15-20 percent. As he previously told the CEO of United Technologies, the parent company of Carrier, it could be better to produce in the US rather than Mexico because his "pro-growth" policies would allow US corporations to "print money."

On Thursday, Trump added, "We're going to make it really great for business. ... We are going to be competitive with anybody in the world. We're going to be doing taxing policies very soon it's going to be coming out. I know that health care is a big problem ... because of the tremendous cost and that's one of the things that we're working on hardest—that and tax policy, and tariffs and trade."

All of this will entail far greater exploitation of the working class. The trade unions at Harley-Davidson—the United Steelworkers (USW) and the International Association of Machinists (IAM)—have a record of imposing sweeping concessions on workers in the name of "saving" American jobs.

In 2010, the USW and IAM signed a seven-year deal at Harley-Davidson's plants in Menomonee Falls, near Milwaukee, and Tomahawk, Wisconsin, that included a seven-year wage freeze, sharp increases in workers' contributions to their health care coverage, and the creation of a "sub-tier" of seasonal or casual workers who will receive no benefits whatsoever and earn starting pay of \$16.80, about half what current workers make.

The lower tier or casual employees can be terminated

without cause and have no job security or even a minimum number of work hours. They also have no right to either bonuses or wage increases—but still must pay dues to the USW and IAM.

Nevertheless, the company is in the midst of laying off more than 200 workers because of slowing sales.

During the lunchtime meeting at the White House, Trump gave a special nod to the union officials, saying, “I am especially honored to welcome the steelworkers and machinists to the White House. ... You folks have been terrific to me. Sometimes your top people didn't support me but the steelworkers supported me, right? A lot of your top people are going to be losing their jobs pretty soon I guess but they're all coming around,” Trump said.

This was apparently a reference to USW President Leo Gerard, who had campaigned for Hillary Clinton, warning workers that a Trump victory would be catastrophic, only to join the pilgrimage of union executives, including AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, to Trump Tower and now the White House.

Even as US and international protests were growing against the hated new president, Gerard and other union officials applauded Trump's executive order pulling the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact, with the USW president pledging to work with the new administration on the “promised, pro-worker, pro-income-growth agenda that prioritizes revitalizing manufacturing.” Gerard also sent a letter to the US Senate backing the confirmation of Ross as commerce secretary.

Trump is using the carrot-and-the-stick approach toward the trade union bureaucracy, courting specific sections like the building trade unions who visited the White House on January 23. At the same time, Vice President Mike Pence has met with Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker to discuss how the Trump administration could essentially end collective bargaining by federal employee unions. Such threats will only drive the union bureaucracy to more fervently demonstrate its usefulness as a labor police force and promoter of nationalist and militarist poison.

The propagation of the myth that America is a society in which class divisions are insignificant, where workers and employers are united in a struggle against foreign countries (and their workers) that are supposedly “stealing jobs,” has long been the stock-in-trade of the unions. Now Trump and his fascist adviser Stephen Bannon have adopted this nationalist propaganda to divert social anger outward, away from the capitalist owners in the US that exploit the working class and monopolize the wealth the

workers create.

In the coming months, the implementation of Trump's pro-corporate agenda, demands for ever-greater sacrifices from workers and efforts to criminalize dissent in the name of “total allegiance to America,” will drive the working class onto the road of struggle, exploding the lies that this government of billionaires is pro-worker.

In this regard, it is worth contrasting the foul collaboration of the unions with the response of rank-and-file workers at the Menomonee Falls plant. After hearing about Trump's planned visit, a second-shift worker at the powertrain plant felt “sick to his stomach,” according to the *Washington Post*, and wrote a private message to the Milwaukee Coalition Against Trump.

“He's against everything I stand for,” the worker said, adding that he did not want the president at his workplace. “The way he talks about people, about women and immigrants, is unacceptable,” he told the *Post*. Another employee “who builds engines, almost left the building. She thought Trump took credit for jobs he didn't save and named as an example Chrysler Fiat, where she said her son is employed,” the *Post* reported, adding, “Nobody knew why Trump was coming, she said.”

Although the secret service had already screened the 92,000 square-foot plant and booked the Hilton City Center in Milwaukee for 100 agents, and a “presidential flight” had been planned from Washington to the Milwaukee area, after a wave of messages, emails and phone calls flooded into the offices of Harley-Davidson's CEO Matt Levatich by Tuesday night, CNN reported that an unnamed administration official said the trip had been canceled.



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