

Sanders covers for UAW at Mississippi Nissan rally

Ed Hightower, Jerry White
7 March 2017

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was the keynote speaker at a rally Saturday in Canton, Mississippi where the United Auto Workers (UAW) is campaigning to win recognition at the local Nissan auto factory. Having lost more than 1 million members since 1979, the Mississippi campaign is the latest effort by the UAW to boost its dues revenue by reversing the string of defeats at manufacturing plants in the southern US.

While Sanders and the unions have blamed “right to work” laws and Republican state officials, the chief reason for the defeats is the perfidious record of the unions and their decades-long collaboration with the corporate-government attack on the jobs and living standards of workers. Sanders, who enjoys close relations with the unions, has very deliberately sought to conceal the real record of the UAW.

Bernie Sanders told the rally, “If you are a member of a union in America, you are going to make 27 percent more than a non-union member. If you are a member of a union, you’re far more likely to have paid family and medical leave. If you are a member of a union, the likelihood is that you will have better health care and a better retirement plan than non-union members,” Sanders said.

To the extent that such a differential still exists, this represents the residual of the mass struggles of workers between the 1930s and 1970s. The UAW and other unions long ago abandoned any struggle against the employers adopting the corporatist outlook of labor-management “partnership.” Over the last four decades, the unions have suppressed every form of resistance by workers while handing over the hard-won gains of generations of workers in the name of making US corporations more competitive and profitable.

Today conditions in UAW-organized GM, Ford and Chrysler factories in the North, not to mention auto parts plants, increasingly resemble those at the Mississippi

Nissan plant where an estimated 40 percent of the 6,400-person workforce are temporary employees and wages are on a tiered system, ranging from a meager \$12 per hour to \$24 at the high end.

Actor and Democratic Party activist Danny Glover, along with NAACP President Cornell Brooks and UAW President Dennis Williams, sought to tie the union’s efforts to increase its base of dues-paying members with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The basic thrust of the argument was that poor wages and conditions at Canton, with its 80 percent African American workforce, are thereby civil rights and human rights issues.

The day before the Mississippi rally, the UAW sanctioned the layoff of 1,300 workers at the General Motors Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant. Most of the workers thrown into the streets with the connivance of the UAW were African American temporary workers, including young black women.

The effort of the unions and Democrats to wrap the Nissan campaign in the mantle of the civil rights movement is aimed at concealing the *class* division that exists between the working class on the one side, and the union executives like Williams who function as well-paid tools for the auto bosses.

It is also part of the historical record that the South became an anti-union haven because the then CIO unions abandoned the struggle to organize Southern workers in the late 1940s and 1950s. The then CIO unions ended “Operation Dixie” to establish even closer ties to the national Democratic Party whose southern representatives enforced the brutal Jim Crow laws against blacks. This coincided with the purge of the socialists who pioneered the building of the CIO in the 1930s and the organization’s merger with the AFL in 1955.

The UAW’s recent efforts to “organize” the European and Asian-based transplants in the South have chiefly

been based on appeals to the employers, not the workers. In 2010, former UAW President Bob King urged employers to “re-examine their instinctive resistance to the notion of unionization, and consider some of the advantages of a positive, productive relationship with a union. Unions can and should play a positive role—and the results show the UAW is doing exactly that.”

Indeed, the Detroit automakers are reaping record profits due to the decades of concessions imposed by the UAW, the suppression of all strikes, and the abandonment of the most elemental interests of the working class. As a reward, the UAW controls billions in corporate stocks, seats on corporate boards and enjoys a myriad of labor-management business schemes.

The march follows a rejection by Boeing workers in South Carolina of union representation, a major blow to the labor bureaucracy’s push into the region, which is experiencing a boom in manufacturing. Production workers at Volkswagen’s Chattanooga plant likewise rejected a UAW drive in February 2014—despite or perhaps because the company openly campaigned for UAW recognition.

Prior to the Chattanooga vote, the UAW reached a “neutrality agreement” with the VW plant promising that any future contract would be committed to “maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages [Volkswagen] enjoys relative to its competitors in the United States and North America.”

The march, which garnered little support, specifically demanded that Nissan sign a neutrality agreement in advance of a union recognition vote at the Canton plant.

Workers at another Nissan plant in Smyrna, Tennessee rejected the UAW in 1989 and 2001 votes. No election has been held at the Mississippi plant in Canton. The union has been trying to pressure Nissan through the French government’s ownership stake in Nissan’s business partner, the Renault Group.

Why should workers at Nissan or anywhere else pay dues out of their hard-earned salaries to organizations that function as tools of management and the Democratic Party?

Workers at the Nissan factory certainly need organizations to fight. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recently fined Nissan \$21,000 for safety violations at the Canton plant that led to a worker losing three fingers in a July 2016 accident. In November, a production worker at Nissan’s Smyrna, Tennessee plant died from a crushing blow to the head,

which could have been prevented if safety measures during routine maintenance met industry standards. OSHA also cited the Nissan Smyrna plant for similar violations in 2013 and 2015.

To wage a struggle against unsafe conditions, speed-ups, low wages and the lack of job security, workers will have to build new organizations, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves, and based on the methods of class struggle, not class collaboration. They must be thoroughly committed to the interests of workers, not the profits of the corporations. Moreover, these rank-and-file committees must reject any support to the two parties of big business and the fight for the broadest mobilization to defend the social rights of all workers.

Nissan workers in the US should also forge the closest ties with workers in Japan and throughout the world to wage a common fight against the efforts of the global corporations to force workers into a race to the bottom. That means rejecting all forms of nationalism, which is used by the corporations and the government to divide US workers from their international class brothers and sisters.

Sanders has had long and close relations with the UAW and works with the unions to divert social anger down the reactionary path of economic nationalism. During the 2016 primary election campaign, before telling his supporters to back the Wall Street shill Hillary Clinton, Sanders stopped at UAW Local 600 in suburban Detroit. This was just months after UAW officials rigged the vote to push through a sellout contract at Ford.

Sanders’ so-called “political revolution” has now morphed into open support for Trump’s America First economic nationalism.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact