

The UAW's corporatist alliance with Trump

Niles Niemuth
17 March 2017

On Wednesday, United Auto Workers (UAW) President Dennis Williams joined with President Donald Trump and the CEOs of the Big Three US automakers to promote a reactionary program of extreme economic nationalism, corporatism and war.

The event was a campaign-style speech by Trump before UAW bureaucrats and a section of workers bused in by the auto bosses to the decommissioned Willow Run auto plant in Ypsilanti, a suburb of Detroit.

Trump reprised the fascistic themes of his inaugural address, with a heavy emphasis on the unity of workers, employers and the state in defense of the “national interest” and in opposition to foreigners. “That is how we will succeed and grow together—American workers and American industry side by side,” the president declared. “Nobody can beat us, folks. Nobody can beat us. Because whether we are rich or poor, young or old, black or brown or white, we all bleed the same red blood of patriots.”

As a matter of fact, during the Vietnam years, Trump was able to take advantage of the political connections of his millionaire father to stay out of the military and make sure that none of his “red blood” was spilled in an imperialist war that cost the lives of 58,000 Americans—mostly poor and working class—and upwards of 3 million Vietnamese.

Trump made explicit the warmongering essence of his corporatist ideology, which fraudulently claims that the corporations, the capitalist state and the working class have identical interests. He hailed as the model for today the united effort of the auto companies, the UAW and the state in producing the B-24 bomber at the now-closed plant during World War II.

“At peak production,” Trump said, “listen to this—it’s not the country that we’ve been watching over the last 20 years—they were building one B-24 every single hour. We don’t hear that. We don’t hear that anymore, do we?”

Alluding ominously to his plans for a massive military buildup, he continued, “We’ll be back. We’ll be back soon.”

The head of the UAW signaled his support for these policies by appearing on a panel with Trump and the auto bosses prior to the president’s speech. Williams was

tellingly seated between the ultra-right-wing billionaire Trump and Ford CEO Mark Fields.

The UAW president declared his support for Trump’s trade war agenda against China and Mexico last month and announced that the UAW was reviving its “Buy American” campaign. “He’s the first president that has addressed this issue,” Williams said. “I have to give him kudos for that.”

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, who sits on Trump’s Manufacturing Jobs Initiative panel, promised to partner with Trump in promoting economic nationalism and attacking immigrant workers.

The UAW’s last “Buy American” campaign in the 1980s and 1990s included union officials banning Japanese- and European-built cars from union parking lots, bashing in the windshields of foreign-made cars, and whipping up such hatred that Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American worker in Detroit, was murdered by a Chrysler foreman.

The results of the UAW’s previous efforts to promote American nationalism can be seen in the closed factories and devastated former auto-producing cities across the Midwest. Under the corporatist banner of union-management “partnership,” the union collaborated with the companies in imposing plant closures, mass layoffs and wage cuts so as to promote the competitiveness of American automakers against their overseas competitors.

Wednesday’s event underscored a basic reality: The ultra-right-wing nationalist ideology of Trump and his chief strategist, ex-Breitbart News chief Stephen Bannon, is the ideology of the UAW, AFL-CIO and official unions as a whole. They are all seeking to divert the social anger of workers over deindustrialization, inequality and the ravaging of their living standards along the lines of xenophobia and militarism.

The unions, in lockstep with Bannon, insist on the necessity for national unity, so that American business can dominate its foreign rivals. This requires the suppression of the class struggle. The union leadership misdirects workers by promoting the lie that their problems are caused not by capitalism, but by immigrant workers and the theft of American wealth by foreign powers (and workers) benefiting from unfair trade policies.

This UAW's embrace of corporatism is not a new development. It is the outcome of a protracted process that has extended over the course of many decades.

Leon Trotsky warned of the danger of the incorporation of the unions into the state at the very outset of the CIO in the late 1930s and early 1940s, just as the antisocialist bureaucratic leadership was tying the new industrial unions to President Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party.

"The intensification of class contradictions within each country, the intensification of antagonisms between one country and another, produce a situation in which imperialist capitalism can tolerate (i.e., up to a certain time) a reformist bureaucracy only if the latter serves directly as a petty but active stockholder of its imperialist enterprises, of its plans and programs within the country as well as on the world arena," Trotsky wrote in 1940.

During and after World War II, UAW President Walter Reuther played a particularly reactionary role in the anticommunist evolution of the union. He promoted and signed a no-strike pledge and guaranteed the union's collaboration with the war effort in return for the dues checkoff and the institutionalization of the unions by the state. After the war, the union bureaucracy carried out a vicious purge of left-wing union militants while actively supporting US imperialism and the Cold War. The CIO's merger with the AFL in 1955 established the defense of capitalism and imperialism as the official policy of the union.

The development of union corporatism accelerated along with the decline in the global economic position of American capitalism and the rise of European and Asian rivals to the Big Three auto companies. The establishment of a host of joint union-management bodies, along with various slush funds, was part of an effort to obliterate class consciousness and totally subordinate workers to the demands of the corporations and the government.

During the 1980s, every form of resistance was crushed with the collaboration of the unions. A major turning point was Ronald Reagan's firing and blacklisting of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981, whose bitter strike was broken with the assistance of the AFL-CIO and UAW bureaucracies. PATCO was followed by a series of bitter and often violent strikes, including Phelps Dodge, Continental Airlines, Greyhound, Hormel and AT Massey Coal, all of which were isolated and betrayed by the union leadership. The bureaucrats argued that strikes and work actions had to be suppressed in an era of globalization in order to ensure the profitability of American corporations.

Analyzing the 1984 UAW-GM contract, which established the legal and technical foundations for the direct collaboration of the union bureaucracy with the corporations

and the state, the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, wrote: "The practice of anti-communism is a corporatist alliance with the auto bosses against the auto workers, the abandonment of any defense of the gains made by the union in the past 50 years, the surrender of jobs, wages, benefits and work rules. It is a total sellout and betrayal of the independent interests of the working class, in order to defend the capitalist system."

Staffed and run by right-wing bureaucrats, the unions are today a savage industrial police force that works with the government and corporations to suppress the class struggle. They are the direct enforcers of cuts in wages, pensions and health benefits. The income of the top bureaucrats and their aides, which can reach well into six figures, is entirely dependent on this parasitic arrangement.

The UAW has not called a single national strike in nearly 40 years. Once considered a fact of daily life, strikes and walkouts have all but disappeared from the scene. Limited and deliberately isolated strikes are called on occasion to divide the working class and wear down and starve militant workers into submitting to company demands. Not surprisingly, a drastic decline in union membership has accompanied the unions' ever more direct and open collaboration with the corporations to cut living standards and shut down factories.

Williams' appearance with Trump is only the latest confirmation of the far-sighted analysis of the trade unions made by the Socialist Equality Party.

The reality is that workers are totally without any form of representation in their fight for decent wages and working conditions. The unions' role as an industrial police force and their open alignment with the fascistic policies of the Trump administration raise sharply the need for the building in every workplace of democratic rank-and-file committees, which can take the struggle in defense of jobs and living standards out of the hands of the bureaucracy and place the initiative back in the hands of the working class.

This industrial fight must be combined with an independent political strategy, based on a break with the two-party system of American big business and the building of a mass socialist movement of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact