

UAW debacle at Mississippi Nissan plant

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In the latest debacle for the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, workers at the Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi voted 63 percent to 37 percent on Friday to reject the UAW's bid for recognition as the employees' bargaining agent. This is only the most recent in a string of similar defeats for the UAW, which has failed to win a recognition vote at any major auto factory in the US South, including Volkswagen in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 2014 and Nissan's Smyrna, Tennessee plant in 1998 and again in 2001.

After seeing the UAW collaborate with the auto corporations for nearly four decades in the shutdown of factories, elimination of jobs and imposition of wage and benefit concessions, workers have drawn definite conclusions. The UAW is despised not only by workers outside the union, but also by the majority of workers still within it. The Nissan workers saw no reason to hand over two-and-a-half hours of their monthly pay in dues payments to a corrupt, right-wing bureaucracy that leeches off the workers it claims to represent.

Incapable of making any appeal to the class unity of workers, the UAW and its supporters, including Bernie Sanders and various Democratic Party politicians, African-American clergy and Hollywood celebrities, cast the Mississippi vote in racial terms, claiming a UAW victory would advance the "civil rights" of the factory's largely African-American workforce.

The workers did not buy it, and for good reason. The UAW is not identified with any serious struggle. It has spent the latter half of its existence suppressing strikes and working to boost the profits and competitiveness of the US-based auto giants. It long ago extended its nationalist support for American capitalism to embrace the corporatist outlook of labor-management "partnership." This was summed up in the slogan on t-shirts handed out by the UAW in Mississippi, which read, "Pro-Nissan, Pro-Union."

The UAW tried to convince the company it would make a bigger profit by utilizing its services than by excluding it. Before the 2014 vote at VW's Chattanooga plant, the

UAW signed a "neutrality agreement" committing it to "maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages" Volkswagen enjoyed over its competitors. This meant, in practice, a pay cut for VW workers.

VW management backed the UAW, but the union still lost the vote. Nissan did not see the point of paying a middle man to help exploit the workforce.

Following the Nissan vote, UAW President Dennis Williams blamed the defeat on Republican Governor Phil Bryant and other politicians, complaining that they "ran a vicious campaign against its own work force that was comprised of intense scare tactics, misinformation and intimidation."

This is self-serving nonsense. The UAW lost not because of anti-union agitation but because of its rotten, pro-company record. It is a matter of historical fact that the socialists and left-wing militants who built the UAW and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s were forced to operate underground, facing the constant violence of company goons and spies.

The UAW was built in giant class battles, including the Toledo Auto Lite strike and the Flint sit-down against General Motors, then the world's largest corporation. Workers defied the National Guard, the police and judges who issued injunctions as fast as the corporations demanded them. The UAW's rapid growth—from 35,000 to 350,000 between 1937 and 1938—coincided with a wave of mass industrial struggles, which were primarily led by workers inspired by the victory of the Russian working class in the October Revolution of 1917.

The decades-long degeneration of the UAW and its transformation into a direct tool of corporate management had its roots in the anti-socialist witch-hunt and purge of the unions after World War II. On this basis, the UAW and the other recently formed industrial unions were consolidated as pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist organizations, allied with the Democratic Party and opposed to the independent political organization of the working class.

UAW President Walter Reuther expelled more than 100 UAW staff members in 1947 and forced others to sign anti-communist loyalty oaths, prompting one opponent to later say, “It shouldn’t be called McCarthyism, it should be called Reutherism.”

America’s domination of the world economy and its policy of relative class compromise came to an end in the late 1970s. The American ruling class, facing a growing challenge from its European and Asian rivals, shifted to a policy of class warfare. This was initiated under the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter, which deliberately drove up unemployment by means of high interest rates and oversaw the first Chrysler bailout in 1980, which involved a wave of plant closings and wage cuts. Republican President Ronald Reagan expanded on this policy, initiating a decade of government-backed union-busting with the 1981 firing of 11,000 striking air traffic controllers.

The UAW and the rest of the unions, based on nationalism and the defense of capitalism, had no progressive answer to the globalization of production, which the capitalists used to shift production to cheap labor regions around the world. In the name of boosting the international competitiveness of the Detroit-based auto giants, the UAW abandoned any resistance to the corporate-government onslaught, adopted corporatism as its official doctrine in 1983, and waged a filthy nationalist campaign to blame Japanese and other foreign workers, not the auto bosses, for the assault on American workers.

In return for the UAW becoming an active partner in imposing management’s dictates, the auto executives funneled billions of dollars into joint “training” programs and other labor-management schemes controlled by the UAW bureaucracy, which now had a new source of income independent of the cash flow from its shrinking base of dues-paying members. To overcome legal prohibitions against company-paid unions dating back to the 1930s, Congress had to pass the Labor Management Cooperation Act of 1978.

A significant factor in the defeat of the UAW in Mississippi was the corruption scandal involving the late UAW Vice President General Holiefield, who, federal prosecutors say, received more than \$1.2 million in bribes from Fiat Chrysler executives between 2009 and 2014, when he was negotiating sellout contracts with the company. The payoffs were delivered through the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center. This is not a matter of a single “bad actor,” as UAW President Williams claimed last week, but the essence of the relationship between the

unions, the corporations and the government.

The same middle class and pseudo-left organizations that would have nothing to do with the unions in the 1960s and 1970s, when the unions still had the allegiance of tens of millions of workers, became the most avid defenders of these organizations when they transformed themselves into an industrial police force. All of these fake “left” organizations, including the International Socialist Organization and the Democratic Socialists of America, insist today that workers bow before the authority of the right-wing, anti-working class trade union apparatuses.

The fight against the industrial dictatorship in the factories and the looting of wages, health benefits and pensions will not and cannot proceed through the unions, but only in a struggle by workers to free themselves from their control. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of factory committees, democratically elected and controlled by rank-and-file workers and based on a recognition of the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the working class and those of the capitalist exploiters and their political representatives.

The decades-long betrayal carried out by the UAW demonstrates the impossibility of building a labor movement based on anti-communism and nationalism. A new strategy is needed to guide the coming mass struggles against inequality, poverty wages and war. This means a break with both capitalist parties and the building of a mass political movement of the working class, based on the fight for the international unity of all workers and the socialist reorganization of economic life to meet the needs of working people, not the profit greed of the super-rich.



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