

Pseudo-lefts lament United Auto Workers defeat in Nissan vote

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The overwhelming defeat suffered by the United Auto Workers at the Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi earlier this month has evoked hand-wringing and lamentation on the part of the pseudo-left defenders of the trade union bureaucracy.

Jacobin magazine, in a piece titled “Crushing Blow,” called the UAW’s defeat “nothing less than a knock-out punch ending for the foreseeable future any efforts by the UAW to organize the large, predominately foreign-owned auto assembly plants in the South.”

For its part, *Socialist Worker*, the organ of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), called the vote a “bitter defeat” that added “to the urgent debate about what it will take to organize the unorganized in the South.”

Workers at the factory voted by a margin of 63-37 percent against representation by the UAW in the latest in a string of debacles for the union at auto plants in the US South. In none of these elections has the UAW been able to give workers the slightest reason to vote for union representation. In the failed 2014 union recognition vote at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the UAW sought and received the public support of company management.

At Nissan in Mississippi the UAW did not attempt to make a class appeal to workers by promising better wages and working conditions. Instead, it appealed to the majority African-American workforce on the basis of race, joining with liberal organizations and Democratic politicians to cast the vote as a civil rights issue. It combined this with the promotion of its corporatist outlook of labor-management partnership, summed up in the slogan “Pro-Nissan, Pro-Union.”

The UAW brought in Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and actor Danny Glover to promote the union, as though the pro-corporate record of the Obama administration would inspire workers to vote for the union.

Socialist Worker concedes that Nissan “set its wages to surpass the highest wages paid to Tier 2 workers in the Big Three, eliminating from the start perhaps the most effective union recruiting tool: the higher wages and better benefits

enjoyed by union workers compared to nonunion workers.”

However, it maintains a damning silence over the significance of Nissan paying more to its tier two workers than the US-based “Big Three” companies, where the UAW has been the bargaining agent for nearly 70 years. What kind of “union” signs contracts that allow the bosses to pay less to its members than non-union plants pay their workers?

The answer is clear—a right-wing, pro-company organization that is hostile to the workers! This the ISO dares not say because it supports the UAW bureaucracy and is no less hostile to the working class. Had it won the vote, the UAW would have quickly set about proving its utility to the company by helping it lower its labor costs even further.

Workers at Nissan were well aware of the record of the UAW and wanted nothing to do with it. Far from fighting to raise wages, it has dedicated itself over the past 40 years to suppressing resistance to low wages, speed-up and the reversal of past gains such as health care and pensions. Today, tier two workers at UAW-organized factories earn little more than the equivalent of the \$5 a day Henry Ford paid his workers 90 years ago.

In attempting to explain the most recent UAW debacle, pseudo-left groups such as the ISO and *Jacobin*—whose editor and publisher, Bhaskar Sunkara, is a leading member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)—blame the defeat on management’s anti-union campaign. In so far as they are critical of the UAW, they cite “missteps” or “incompetence.” *Labor Notes* goes further, blaming Nissan workers themselves for their supposed “reluctance to rock the boat.”

This is under conditions where the UAW leadership has cozied up to the fascistic Trump administration based on shared support for “America First” nationalism and trade war against the overseas rivals of US capitalism. UAW President Dennis Williams appeared next to Trump at a rally this spring in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Shortly before the Nissan vote, Williams announced that the UAW was reviving its reactionary “Buy American” campaign. The last time the union conducted such a

campaign, in the 1980s, it featured UAW officials smashing Toyotas with sledgehammers and UAW parking lots banning foreign-built vehicles. That effort to pit US workers against their Japanese, Mexican and German class brothers and sisters and line them up behind their “own” American bosses led to the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit by a Chrysler foreman and his stepson.

At the same time, the UAW adopted the corporatist program of union-management partnership, suppressed opposition to plant closures and layoffs, and entered into corrupt joint business operations with the Big Three companies.

The results of the decades-long drive by the American unions to suppress the class struggle are revealed in US Bureau of Labor Statistics figures showing that work stoppages have decreased 90 percent over the last four decades. The period 2007 to 2016 had the lowest average number of major work stoppages, 14, of any decade on record.

Nor do the various pseudo-left groups have anything significant to say about the ongoing federal investigation into UAW corruption that has documented how top union officials involved in negotiating national contracts took hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes, funneled through union-company joint operations and slush funds. This was their payoff for helping to impose sellout contracts that slashed real wages, health care and pensions, imposed the hated two-tier pay scale, increased the use of temporary workers, and enabled the company to impose speedup and forced overtime.

Far from being an aberration, the corporate bribery of UAW officials is endemic to the organization. It is the practical expression of the union’s program of union-company partnership.

The attitude of the various pseudo-left tendencies toward the unions is not a matter of mistaken orientation. These groups, like the anti-communist trade union bureaucracy, represent privileged upper-middle-class social layers that have seen their wealth increase due to the boom in the stock market, paid for by the immiseration of ever broader layers of the working population. Side by side with the decline in strike activity, the percentage of US gross domestic product going to corporate profits has soared, fueling the market boom that has enriched these layers of the upper-middle class.

This also explains the support by the pseudo-left for the wars being waged by the US ruling class for the domination of the oil-rich Middle East and other strategic regions, raising the danger of war with nuclear-armed Russia and China.

Groups such as the ISO are ferociously hostile to the

critical line adopted by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* toward the unions and the call by the SEP for workers to free themselves from the grip of these organizations and build new, democratic organs of struggle—rank-and-file committees—in the factories, work locations and working class communities.

In an earlier period, when the unions still had the active allegiance of significant sections of militant workers and led limited struggles for improvements in living standards, the pseudo-left denounced the unions and largely ignored strikes. They attacked the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, for fighting to build a revolutionary leadership in the unions in opposition to the bureaucracy and its political alliance with the big business Democratic Party.

The pseudo-left began taking an interest in the unions only when these organizations had abandoned any struggle in defense of the working class and instead devoted their efforts to suppressing strikes, imposing concessions contracts and integrating themselves into the structure of the corporations and the state. Based on this anti-working class orientation, they see the unions as a source of income and privilege and busy themselves with obtaining posts within the corrupt union apparatus.

Nissan workers were correct in rejecting the UAW, but that does not solve the problems confronting auto workers—union and non-union alike. Workers need a force on the shop floor that defends them and fights for their interests against corporate exploitation and the daily attacks of management. The UAW long ago abandoned this basic function. That is why it is necessary for auto workers, at Nissan and throughout the country, to form rank-and-file factory committees that will assume responsibility for the day-to-day fight against the company. For advise and assistance in planning for and building rank-and-file factory committees, sign up for the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter.



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