

As UAW Constitutional Convention opens: The class issues facing autoworkers

Shannon Jones**9 June 2018**

With the quadrennial convention of the United Auto Workers (UAW) set to open Monday in Detroit, there are signs of an upsurge in militancy on the part of US autoworkers. An explosion of anger against a sweetheart deal between the UAW and General Motors to bring low-paid subcontract workers into the Lordstown Assembly plant in advance of the layoff of 1,500 workers and a similar deal at Lake Orion Assembly were followed by a spontaneous walkout by Ford Flat Rock Assembly workers after a supervisor tried to restart the line following the horrific injury of a veteran worker.

With more than one year before the September 2019 expiration of the UAW contracts with GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler (FCA), attacks on autoworkers are escalating. There is a concerted effort on the part of the car companies to drive out older, “legacy” workers and replace them with lower-paid tier-two workers and temporary part-time (TPT) workers. The 2015 UAW agreement allowed the companies to flood the auto plants with TPT workers while maintaining in place the two-tier, in reality, multi-tier, pay and benefit system.

This takes place under conditions where the bureaucratic apparatus of the UAW is in deep crisis, rocked by an ongoing probe into illegal company payoffs to UAW negotiators. This focuses on the siphoning off of at least \$1.5 million from the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center into the pockets of UAW officials, which FCA executives said was aimed at keeping union leaders “fat, dumb and happy.”

At the same time, all of the auto companies are in the midst of ruthless cost-cutting drives as Wall Street increases pressure for higher profit margins. This is taking its toll on safety conditions, as companies seek ways to crank up production through the erosion of work rules, faster line speeds and forced overtime. The development of new technologies, such as self-driving vehicles, is putting increasing pressure on car companies to free up cash for investment by sweating it off the backs of workers.

Autoworkers should not wait until the 2019 contract expiration to oppose these conditions. The time to organize a fightback is now. The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* calls for the formation of rank-and-file factory committees to spearhead a counteroffensive against the management-UAW assault on workers.

The growth of rank-and-file militancy takes place under conditions where decades of betrayals have led to the deep discrediting of the UAW. Its program of extreme nationalism and corporatist union-management collaboration has alienated both younger and veteran workers alike.

So far, UAW executives Virdell King and Keith Mickens, plus Monica Morgan, wife of the late UAW Vice President General Holiefield, have pleaded guilty in the expanding federal corruption probe. At least four of the top eight members of the 2015 UAW National Bargaining Committee at Fiat Chrysler have been indicted or implicated in the scandal.

Federal investigators are also reportedly looking into a charity run by UAW Vice President for General Motors Cynthia Estrada, who had been expected to succeed UAW President Dennis Williams when he retires in June, and into joint UAW-management training centers at Ford and GM. Norwood Jewell, head of the UAW Fiat Chrysler department, has taken early retirement and UAW Secretary Treasurer Gary Casteel says he will not seek re-election.

The UAW 37th Constitutional Convention will select new international officers. However, the hand-picked successor to Dennis Williams, UAW Region 5 Director Gary Jones, is under a cloud. Jones was among UAW officials present at a resort in Palm Springs, California in January, 2015 in an event tied to thousands of dollars in illegal spending from joint training center money. Also present at the conference was Jewell. Jones, like other top UAW officials, headed a murky foundation, “The 5 Game Changers Charity Fund.”

The convention is a stage-managed affair, during which no expression of the genuine concerns of rank-and-file UAW members is tolerated. A large portion of the delegates are UAW officials or their cronies. Past attempts by “dissidents” to nominate opposition candidates have been squelched in short order. It was reported to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that this year, for the first time, no nominated candidate will be allowed to make a campaign speech at the convention.

UAW officials will undoubtedly boast of the rise in union membership and the great advances and achievements obtained in the 2015 contract settlement. What hypocrisy! The deal institutionalized the two-tier wage system and removed the limits on the hiring of temporary part-time workers, who lead a

precarious existence working for lower pay and few benefits.

As for expanding membership, it is largely outside of the auto industry. In 2017, Nissan workers in Canton, Mississippi and workers at the Fuyao Glass America plant in Dayton, Ohio delivered resounding defeats to UAW unionization attempts.

UAW executives can also be expected to line up behind the fascistic Trump administration's trade war policies, including possible import tariffs on the foreign trade rivals of US car companies.

As workers recall, at the last convention held in 2014, the UAW rammed through a dues increase, allegedly to build up the strike fund in preparation for the 2015 contract battle. In reality, the strike fund is a gigantic slush fund for the union bureaucracy, which regularly taps into it to finance its operations, giving the UAW a direct incentive to suppress strikes in order to preserve its own perks and salaries.

It is easy to predict that amidst the self-congratulatory speeches no mention will be made of the tragic death of a young TPT worker, Jacoby Hennings, who died last October, purportedly of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, in an incident that has never been fully investigated. Just prior to his death, Hennings spent an hour with UAW officials in the plant discussing an undisclosed grievance.

Amidst the visible disintegration of the union apparatus, several critics of the UAW bureaucracy have announced they are planning to challenge the administration caucus slate, including Brian Keller, who works at Fiat Chrysler's Mopar operations outside of Detroit; Leroy McKnight, a GM retiree from Lansing, Michigan, who hosts a blog radio show; and Gary Walkowicz, a lower level UAW Local 600 official at the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant.

The current batch of dissidents all claim the UAW can be pressured into changing its policy of corporatist union-management collaboration. This is a false orientation. The evolution of the UAW into a right-wing corporatist syndicate is rooted in fundamental objective processes and parallels the corporatist degeneration of unions all over the world.

Based on its nationalist and pro-capitalist program, the UAW had no progressive answer to the rise of transnational production and the emergence of powerful global competitors to the US-based auto companies. From seeking to pressure the auto companies for concessions to the workers, it transformed its policy into pressuring workers for concessions to the US-based companies in order to attract globally mobile capital. Economic nationalism and protectionism went hand in hand with the renunciation of any interests of autoworkers independent of the profit drive of "their" companies and the establishment of joint union-management structures at every level. The inevitable outcome of this process was the surrender of virtually all of the gains won over generations of struggle going back to the 1930s.

As the membership of the UAW plummeted, the union developed new sources of income to offset the loss of dues.

This included the setting up of joint labor-management committees that provide a "legal" means for the auto companies to pour billions of dollars into the coffers of the UAW. In addition, the UAW controls a multi-billion-dollar retiree health care trust fund, or VEBA, that was initially funded with auto company stock.

The UAW is not a workers' organization but a business entity, with a small army of officials earning more than \$100,000 in yearly salaries plus other undisclosed income and business ventures. In return for suppressing strikes and imposing concessions demanded by the companies, these parasites receive a portion of the profits extracted from the labor of autoworkers.

To answer those who claim the UAW can be reformed through the installation of new leaders it is instructive to examine the fate of past dissident movements. A case in point is the New Directions faction that emerged in the late 1980s. Once in office, New Directions leaders, such as Flint UAW Local 599 President David Yettaw, pursued the same class collaborationist policies as the UAW national leadership, imposing job cuts, speed-up and the gutting of working conditions. In the end, GM was able to shut down the massive Buick City complex in Flint without facing any opposition.

The current group of "dissidents" says not a word about the political issues facing the working class. However, all the vital issues facing workers are intensely political. Workers must advance their own strategy in opposition to the corporate-controlled two-party system and the subordination of every facet of life to the profit demands of American big business. They must reject the nationalism of the unions, which inevitably leads to war, and unite with workers throughout the globe in a struggle against the capitalist owners of industry and finance.

Workers must build a political party of their own to fight for a workers' government and the transformation of auto and every other major industry into publicly owned entities under the democratic control of the working class.

In line with this perspective, the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* calls for the building of rank-and-file factory committees to be the genuine voice of autoworkers inside the plants. These committees should oppose the company-UAW gang-up against workers and forge the closest possible links between workers in different factories.

Workers interested in becoming involved are urged to contact the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*.



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