

At meeting on GM plant closings, DSA covers for UAW and Democrats

Jerry White**20 December 2018**

The Detroit branch of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the *Labor Notes* publication sponsored a “Community conversation on the GM Plant Closing” Tuesday night at Wayne State University. The event featured Rashida Tlaib, a DSA member who was recently elected as the Democratic Party’s candidate for US House of Representatives in Michigan’s 13th Congressional District, which covers parts of Detroit and its western suburbs.

The meeting took place as anger continues to grow over the November 26 announcement by General Motors that it is closing five plants in the US and Canada, including the Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant, and eliminating nearly 15,000 hourly and salaried jobs. To stem popular outrage, CEO Mary Barra said 2,700 hourly workers in the US could be rehired at other plants. This would force hundreds to uproot their families and move as far away as Arlington, Texas for a job. It would not include hundreds of temporary part-time workers, who have no transfer rights.

The event Tuesday night, however, was not intended to organize a fight by rank-and-file autoworkers and other sections of workers to stop the plant shutdowns and mass layoffs. For all their denunciations of GM, “corporate greed” and even capitalism, Tlaib and other speakers accept GM’s destruction of jobs as an accomplished fact.

The Democratic congresswoman-elect and speakers from the DSA and former local union presidents associated with *Labor Notes* and the Autoworker Caravan spent the night promoting illusions in the United Auto Workers and the Democratic Party.

Tlaib was silent on the role of her own party, which under President Obama spearheaded the attack on the jobs and living standards of autoworkers. After handing trillions to bail out the Wall Street banks, Obama demanded that autoworkers accept a 50 percent wage cut for new workers as a condition for bailing out GM and

Chrysler. In addition, the president’s Auto Task Force demanded sweeping cost-cutting, including the closure of two dozen plants in the US and more worldwide, and the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs.

Underscoring her impotence, Tlaib said she sat across from Mary Barra last week at Harvard University and “realized that nothing I said was going to change their minds—it was all about money.” Asked by the event moderator, Jane Slaughter, what would be done with the empty Detroit factory after GM abandoned it, Tlaib said, “There is power of leverage. That might be through other companies coming, I don’t know.” She did not acknowledge that any new owner would demand greater givebacks from workers and more tax abatements to locate in Detroit.

Other speakers, including former UAW officials Wendy Thompson and Frank Hammer, two founders of the Autoworker Caravan, suggested that Tlaib try to persuade her congressional counterparts to transform the closed factory into one that builds electric cars and trucks and wind turbines. This was a rehash of their role in 2009, when they encouraged illusions in the Obama administration, saying the government could be persuaded not to demand wage and benefit concessions and to transform the industry to build public transit.

Aware that millions of workers see the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, as tools of big business, Tlaib tried to encourage workers to keep hope alive in this capitalist party. “We’ve kind of given up, that we don’t think that the votes in City Hall matter,” she said. She noted that many of her constituents asked her, “Are you going to be one of those that sell out when you get to Congress?”

This prompted the following exchange. “How can we help you not to sell out?” the moderator Jane Slaughter asked. The new congresswoman replied that this feat could be accomplished by helping her stay connected with

local issues and advocacy groups instead of “making compromises.” When “I try to set a legislative agenda on behalf of you... If I do things differently it’s not to dis anyone, it’s to keep me from selling out.”

The meeting began with a screening of the 1983 documentary film *Poletown Lives* by George Corsetti, which is about the struggle of working-class residents in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck to oppose the decision by GM and the Detroit city government to evict 4,200 residents and bulldoze their homes, churches and small businesses to make way for a new assembly plant. The Detroit-Hamtramck plant, built in 1985, is now being closed.

The strength of the film was its indictment of the Democrats, in particular Detroit Mayor Coleman Young and the City Council, which deployed police to arrest protesters and carry out the mass evictions on behalf of GM. It also showed how the UAW, whose president was on the corporate board of directors of Chrysler at the time, ignored the pleas of residents and backed the destruction of their neighborhood.

The parallels with the current situation are impossible to miss. Four decades on, the UAW owns millions of dollars in GM shares, has been exposed for taking massive bribes in exchange for signing concessionary contracts, and functions as an unabashed enforcer for corporate management.

Seeking to strike a militant pose, Tlaib later said, “I believe it is time to strike and stand up to GM. Not only did they get \$51 billion to bail them out of bankruptcy,” she continued, “our workers gave up a huge amount of concessions in exchange that they wouldn’t close any other plants.” She left out the fact that it was the UAW and the Democrats that imposed these concessions on workers.

Tlaib and others made it clear that they were not talking about a genuine struggle, led from below by rank-and-file workers. On the contrary, they are talking about backing the bogus campaign by the UAW, which consists of nationalist denunciations of GM for shifting production to Mexico and China, while collaborating with auto executives to impose even deeper concession on workers in the 2019 contracts.

Tlaib, whose campaign was endorsed and financially backed by the UAW and other unions, said she was meeting with top UAW officials the following day to discuss the plant closings. She repeated union president Gary Jones’ claim that the closures were a violation of the 2015 UAW-GM agreement because they had not been

negotiated with the union. Not only does the contract grant management the right to close plants due to “market-related volume decline,” but the UAW has negotiated the closure of scores of factories over the last four decades.

During the question and answer period, a Ford worker at the Dearborn truck plant denounced the UAW for collaborating in “abuse in my plant, screwing TPTs [temporary part-time workers] who pay union dues and have no rights. Why aren’t Ford, GM and FCA all together striking right now? I’m prepared to strike.”

The voice of a genuine worker at the meeting threw a wrench into the efforts to whitewash the role of the UAW and the Democrats. Tlaib handed the mike to Sean Crawford, a DSA supporter who works at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant. “I love my union,” he said, “everything I have now is because of the labor movement... Why aren’t we striking? Under the UAW contract, there are tier two workers and third-party employees. I said let’s get rid of the tiers, and it was amazing union officials opposed it. It’s not bringing us together,” he said lamely. A short video co-produced by Crawford was shown, which did not have a critical word to say about the UAW or the Democrats.

The moderator, Jane Slaughter, would not recognize any speakers from the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*. Prior to the meeting, several DSA members set up a picket line in futile effort to keep attendees from taking newsletters from the WSWS.

Nevertheless, there was great interest among students, workers and young people in the December 9 meeting sponsored by the SEP and the *Autoworker Newsletter*, where workers voted to establish a rank-and-file action committee, independent of the UAW, to fight the plant closings. These committees would fight to link up the struggle of autoworkers with every other section of the working class, and unite US workers with their class brothers and sisters in Canada, Mexico and the rest of the world.

The Ford worker said after the meeting, “This is exactly what we need. That’s how we can unite all workers, in the US and everywhere, to fight.”



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