

More demagoguery and bluster as UAW bargaining convention adjourns

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14 March 2019

The United Auto Workers Bargaining Convention in Detroit closed Wednesday amidst another round of demagogic tub-thumping by UAW President Gary Jones and other officials. The bluster was in inverse proportion to the adoption of any actual measures to address the needs of autoworkers.

The convention, held in advance of the September 14, 2019 contract expiration for 150,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler autoworkers, takes place under conditions of intense anger over the announced closure by General Motors of five plants in the US and Canada and the elimination 14,000 jobs. Workers are determined not only to defend jobs, but also win significant gains under conditions in which Ford, GM and Fiat Chrysler are reaping immense profits.

However, almost nothing of this was reflected on the floor of the convention. The rare delegate who spoke about actual conditions in the plants, such as the brutal treatment of temporary part-time (TPT) workers, was met with indifference or outright hostility from the loyal and well-paid hand-raisers of the UAW bureaucracy who packed the convention hall.

Opposition motions were not even allowed to the floor for a vote, let alone considered and debated. Bargaining committees for the upcoming contract negotiations were announced consisting of corrupt functionaries, including UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada, who was kicked over to head Chrysler negotiations after selling out GM workers in the 2015 contract and afterwards. Estrada's personal foundation is being investigated as part of the federal probe into company payoffs to the UAW.

Referring to the GM plant closures, Jones declared, "There will be no more quiet closing of plants, no more shipping jobs to Mexico and abroad without a sound. They are on notice."

In fact, the Lordstown, Ohio GM plant ended production last week after more than 50 years of operation without a "sound" by the UAW. Thousands of jobs at the Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant and the Oshawa, Ontario factory are set to be eliminated when those plants are closed in late 2018 or early 2019. Transmission plants in Warren, Michigan and White Marsh, Maryland, outside Baltimore, are also slated to close.

The UAW has simply ignored the recent announcement by Fiat Chrysler that it is cutting a shift—1,400 jobs—at its Belvidere, Illinois facility. More layoffs are inevitable as the

car companies seek to reduce capacity under conditions of a continuing slowdown in vehicle sales.

Perhaps taking the prize for bluster UAW Vice President for GM Terry Dittes, who blasted the company for using thousands of temporary workers, when in fact the expanded use of TPTs was one of the key concessions granted by the UAW in the 2015 contract.

The supposed fight that Jones, Dittes and other UAW leaders are leading to "save jobs" is entirely based on lowering the automakers' production costs in the United States in a bidding war against workers in other countries. This policy of endless concessions has led to a drastic lowering of workers' standard of living, and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of autoworker jobs.

This is underscored in the call by the bargaining convention resolution for "insourcing," a code word for reducing labor costs to attract investment. This goes hand-in-hand with unrestrained support for militarism and promotion of trade war measures against the overseas rivals of US capitalism.

The few contract goals advanced by the UAW are vague and insubstantial. For example, the bargaining resolution adopted by the convention calls for "reducing" but not eliminating the use of temporary part-time workers and taking "one or two years off" the eight years a two-tier worker must wait to get top wages, not eliminating the tiers all together. Nowhere does the document say anything about pressing for the recall of laid-off workers.

Meanwhile, Ford is soon expected to announce a major restructuring involving tens of thousands of job cuts across its global operations. All the car companies are under enormous pressure from Wall Street to slash costs in order to drive up profit margins.

The attacks on US and Canadian autoworkers are part of a global restructuring of the auto industry that has seen the recent closure of GM plants in South Korea, and a Ford plant in Brazil. There has also been the announced closure of the only Honda factory in Britain and the possible closure of Ford, Kia and Hyundai plants in China.

A recent piece in the industry publication *Automotive News* gave vent to the automakers' determination to slash health care costs in the upcoming talks. After pointing out that Ford alone

pays \$1 billion toward employee health care, the publication quoted an industrial relations specialist at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, who declared, “We’re returning to major concession negotiations in the auto industry. The major manufacturers are saying: Give us a reason for why we should expand in the US as opposed to China or India or somewhere else.”

The *Automotive News* piece pointed in particular to the “Cadillac Tax” under the Obama administration’s Affordable Care Act that is set to begin in 2022. The measure could impose a 40 percent tax on health care plans similar to the ones currently covering autoworkers, a cost that auto companies are not likely to agree to pay.

At a press conference following the convention, Jones took a direct question about the ongoing federal corruption investigation into the UAW that has implicated former union president Dennis Williams and other top leaders. Jones said he was “saddened and frustrated” by the exposure of illegal payouts to UAW officials and said the union was imposing strict financial oversight to prevent future scandals.

The announced measures follow a report by *Automotive News* that UAW leaders are concerned of a possible federal takeover of the UAW under RICO [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act] that could lead to the ousting of the current leadership.

The revelation that top UAW officials, including members of the bargaining committee that negotiated the 2015 sellout Fiat Chrysler deal, received bribes funneled through the UAW-Chrysler training center has deeply discredited the UAW.

Groups like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the *Labor Notes* publication and Autoworkers Caravan that suggest that the UAW can be reformed are throwing sand in workers’ eyes. The UAW is a business operation. Staffed by a small army of functionaries earning six-figure salaries and controlling some \$1 billion in assets, the UAW acts as a labor contractor for the auto companies, working to stifle opposition to the continuous lowering of workers’ living standards.

The growing opposition of rank-and-file autoworkers was expressed in the powerful response generated by February 9 demonstration in Detroit at GM headquarters called by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees to oppose GM plant closings.

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party call for the building of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to be the genuine voice of workers. These committees should be established now, well in advance of the 2019 contract, to begin to mobilize workers around their own demands and to assert their interests against the auto companies and the pro-management UAW.

The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* calls for the rehiring of all laid-off and victimized workers, the abolition of tiers, the hiring of all TPT workers as full-time workers with full rights

and benefits and a 40 percent increase for current and retired workers.

The fight for these demands will require an all-out struggle. To be successful, workers must be guided by a socialist strategy that begins not with the interests of the corporations but the needs of workers and society at large. They must oppose the money-mad drive of Wall Street for ever greater profits, through the unification of workers across industries and national borders in a common struggle for a radical reorganization of society based on production for human need, not profit.

Politically the UAW’s promotion of extreme nationalism and support for the big business two-party system is aimed at blocking any effort to unify workers internationally in a common struggle against capitalism and the global automakers and banks.

In the days running up to the bargaining convention UAW officials met with Trump’s trade ambassador, Robert Lighthizer, and praised the trade war policies of the Trump administration and in particular the renegotiation of the North America Free Trade Agreement.

Against the global strategy of the auto companies, workers must develop their own international strategy. Workers across the Americas as well as Europe and Asia face a common enemy in the transnational auto companies. The recent strikes by maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico greatly strengthens the fight of workers across North America and undercuts attempts to pit US and Canadian workers against their brothers South of the Rio Grande.

We encourage workers who want to learn more to contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.



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