

At Detroit panel discussion

DSA Democrat Rashida Tlaib opposes fight against GM plant shutdowns

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At a panel discussion on the General Motors plant closings hosted by the *Labor Notes* publication and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) last weekend, the speakers rejected any actual fight to stop the closures and defend jobs. Instead they pushed the Green New Deal backed by a section of the Democratic Party, along with capitalist “co-ownership” schemes and support for the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Canadian Unifor union.

The panel provided no perspective for workers to fight GM’s plans to close five factories and cut some 15,000 jobs in North America. The Oshawa, Ontario assembly plant is slated to close later this year and the Lordstown, Ohio assembly plant has already been shuttered. GM announced a temporary delay in the closing of the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, which is now scheduled to continue at least some production through January 2020.

The UAW, embroiled in a widening corruption scandal involving bribes by management to rig contract negotiations, has said it will raise the issue of plant closings in the upcoming 2019 contract discussions. This means continuing the decades-long policy of giving up concessions supposedly to “save” jobs, a policy, which in reality has never saved a single job.

The Canadian auto union, Unifor, responded to the announced closing of the Oshawa plant, which sparked militant sit down protests by workers, by launching a publicity campaign against GM, calling for a boycott of cars assembled in Mexico. The reactionary and divisive campaign, backed by the UAW, targeting Mexican workers came at the same time as maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico launched a series of militant strikes in defiance of the unions.

The GM plant closings will devastate the lives of workers, who face the loss of their livelihoods or forced transfer to distant plants and is part of a wave of job cuts in the auto industry worldwide. By contrast, panelists adopted a complacent and self-congratulatory tone, touting the election of DSA members Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Congress as Democrats and calling for the election of more “class struggle fighters” to Congress.

The panel discussion came at the end of a day-long *Labor*

Notes “Troublemakers School” for lower level union officials. The purpose of this “training,” as are all the activities of the ex-radicals around *Labor Notes*, is to provide a “left” cover for the moribund and reactionary trade unions. Since its founding in 1976, the publication and its conferences have been a conduit for “dissident” groups, such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), the New Directions caucus in the UAW and others, to gain positions in the labor bureaucracy.

Last year, the TDU insisted 250,000 UPS workers could not take strike action without the approval of the Teamsters bureaucracy, which had just overridden a majority vote to reject a sellout contract. In the recent wave of teacher strikes, *Labor Notes* hailed the betrayals by the unions as “victories.” In one of the few articles it has published on the UAW corruption scandal, *Labor Notes* featured an interview with a former local level UAW official who defended the absurd claim that payoffs by management to union officials in the millions of dollars had no influence on contract negotiations.

In the recent period *Labor Notes* has essentially merged its activities with those of the DSA, based on their common opportunist politics and support for the Democrats.

Tlaib, a freshman congressman from Michigan’s 13th District, was the guest of honor at the panel discussion. She is a congressional sponsor of the Green New Deal, a political diversion aimed at giving a left cover to the Democratic Party.

Jane Slaughter a former editor of *Labor Notes*, who is now a member of the DSA, chaired the meeting and introduced the panelists.

Natasha Fernandez-Silber, class action lawyer and chair of the Detroit chapter of the DSA, spoke first. She explained that the DSA had decided on a scheme to relate the Green New Deal to the closure of the Detroit-Hamtramck plant essentially to provide a cover for the refusal of the UAW to oppose the plant closings. “Given that the UAW wasn’t doing any public rallies or anything,” Fernandez-Silber said, “We didn’t want to say, ‘keep plants open’ because that is not good enough. We wanted to say if you are going to close the plant, we want it back.”

In other words, the DSA rejected from the start any fight to

actually defend the jobs of GM workers by keeping the plants open. In the case of the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, the call for a Green New Deal is based on an appeal to Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, a shill for billionaires like Dan Gilbert and the Ilitch family, to seize the facility using eminent domain and convert it to “green” manufacturing. In the highly unlikely event that such a thing happened, it would be based on the creation of yet another “enterprise zone” offering up tax breaks and a cheap labor workforce to attract corporate investment.

In a further flight of fancy, Fernandez-Silber outlined a plan for a Great Lakes Authority along the model of the Tennessee Valley Authority established by the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s.

The entire Green New Deal is a fraud on many levels. While its grand rhetoric calls for “zero greenhouse gas emissions” and “to create millions of good, high-wage jobs and ensure prosperity and economic security for all people,” it proposes to do this within the framework of the existing capitalist order. Further, nowhere does it call for a *global* plan of action to address climate change, the only serious basis on which the looming environmental catastrophe can be addressed.

Further, the Green New Deal as advanced in Congress is nonbinding, meaning that even if it were adopted it would have no real policy impact. Well aware that they could expose the pretensions of the Democrats, the Republicans forced a vote on the Green New Deal last week so it could be defeated. Senate Democrats all voted “present,” essentially abstaining, in a desperate maneuver to cover the divisions within the party between the open shills for big business and the phony “progressives.” In reality, most Democrats are bitterly hostile to the bill, as to any measures that might impinge, in even the slightest degree, on the profits of big business.

The next panelist, Rebecca Keetch, a member of Unifor Local 222 education committee at the Oshawa plant, praised the reactionary and expensive ad campaign by Unifor demanding a boycott of vehicles built in Mexico, declaring, “Unifor should be given respect for the campaign they have put on.”

And the result of this great effort? Keetch later conceded, “If the rumors are true, the end is maybe 600 jobs, the low end could be 50 jobs,” she said, referring to the Oshawa plant, which once employed 24,000 workers.

The third speaker was Sean Crawford, a DSA supporter and former UAW committeeman who recently transferred from the Detroit-Hamtramck plant to the GM truck plant in Flint, Michigan. He focused his remarks on praise for the Green New Deal. While in an aside he lamented the concessions given up over the years, he never mentioned the role of the UAW in imposing these cuts nor the ongoing corruption scandal in the union. Incredibly, Crawford said nothing about the impact of the GM plant closures on workers and the community.

Congresswoman Tlaib, the concluding speaker, like other panelists, used left-sounding rhetorical flourishes to dress up her essentially nationalist, pro-capitalist program. The

perspective she advances, like that of the DSA as a whole, is based on the radically false notion that the Democratic Party, one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world, can be captured by workers and transformed into a vehicle for progressive social change.

Tlaib advanced no proposals to fight the GM plant closings. Instead she rambled on about the Green New Deal, directly counterposing it to the fight for jobs. There is a “romanticization of jobs,” she declared, “jobs can’t fix cancer, jobs didn’t get us anything.”

She followed that slap in the face to laid-off GM workers with a call for people to “stand with” her claiming “there are many of us in Congress, there are more that are with us.” She added later, “I promise you we are going to get so many things that are critically important.”

According to Tlaib and the DSA, the Democrats, through the moral suasion of Bernie Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez & Co., will persuade and cajole the ruling class to hand over incremental reforms. Far from allowing any inroads of their personal fortunes, however, the ruling class in the US and around the world have spent the last four decades destroying previous reforms and building up the state machinery to suppress popular opposition.

The role of the DSA is to bolster the deeply discredited unions and the Democratic Party at a time when millions of workers and young people are moving sharply to the left.

The struggle to secure the social and democratic rights of the working class, including the defense of jobs and living standards, requires a political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend. This means the fight for a socialist program, including the transformation of the giant corporations like GM and the Wall Street banks into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically run by the working class.

The development of a powerful counter-offensive will not come through the corrupt nationalist and pro-capitalist unions but through the formation of new organizations of working class struggle, including rank-and-file factory committees, to unite autoworkers and all sections of workers across the US and to link up these struggles with workers internationally.

The panel discussion underscored the political bankruptcy of the DSA and pseudo-left groups like *Labor Notes*. Those interested in organizing a genuine fight against plant closings and in defense of jobs should contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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