

On eve of auto contract talks, VW workers in Tennessee reject UAW again

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Last week, workers at the Volkswagen assembly plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, voted 833–776 to reject the bid by the United Auto Workers (UAW) to gain recognition as the collective bargaining agent at the plant. This was the second rebuke by workers at the VW plant since 2014 and the latest in a string of defeats for the UAW, including at the Canton, Mississippi Nissan plant and at Fuyao Glass America outside Dayton, Ohio.

Workers in Chattanooga were correct to reject “representation” by the UAW, which is an agency of corporate management that has presided over catastrophic job losses and wage declines for US autoworkers over the last four decades.

Far from defending the interests of workers, the UAW is notorious for colluding with the auto bosses in the creation of multiple tiers of wages and benefits. It has helped convert a large portion of the workforce at the Detroit-based automakers into temporary part-time workers who pay union dues and lack the most elemental rights.

The UAW has offered no serious opposition to General Motors' plant closings and mounting layoffs throughout the auto industry. Instead, it has ratcheted up its anti-foreigner American nationalism, which divides US workers from their class brothers and sisters internationally, who are facing the same attacks by the global corporations. The peddling of such nationalist poison can hardly attract the support of workers at the foreign-owned transplants in the US, including German-based VW.

The UAW corruption scandal has revealed the transformation of this organization into a corporate syndicate and cheap-labor contractor. Federal prosecutors have charged the entire UAW as a “co-conspirator” in the bribery scheme with Fiat Chrysler. Top UAW negotiators have been convicted for accepting millions in payoffs in exchange for signing pro-company contracts that have stripped autoworkers of their jobs, wages and rights.

On the eve of the VW vote, the UAW also demonstrated its role as an out-and-out strikebreaker. It ordered its hospital staff members at the Mercy Health St. Vincent Medical

Center in Toledo, Ohio to cross the picket lines of striking nurses, who are also UAW members. UAW International officials unilaterally canceled the six-week strike of the nurses and ordered them back to work before voting or even seeing the UAW-backed deal with hospital management.

The UAW was unable to win support despite deplorable conditions faced by VW workers, whose starting pay for full-time workers is just \$16 an hour and tops out at \$23.50. A large portion of the Chattanooga workforce consists of temporary or contract workers. One staffing company, Aerotek, supplies 30 to 40 percent of the workers, with starting pay at around \$14.50 per hour.

UAW officials blamed management and US labor laws for the defeat at Chattanooga. “The Company ran a brutal campaign of fear and misinformation,” said Tracy Romero, UAW organizing director. “Over a period of nine weeks—an unprecedented length of time due to legal gamesmanship—Volkswagen was able to break the will of enough workers to destroy their majority.”

The attempt to blame management is a fraud. In 2014, VW management backed the UAW's unionization bid in an effort to get legal sanction for a “works council” similar to the corporatist scheme it has at its German plants with the IG Metall union. The two-year campaign by the union and VW was defeated.

Many Chattanooga workers no doubt recalled the fact that in 2014 the UAW gained management's support by agreeing to a neutrality agreement that committed the UAW to “maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages [Volkswagen] enjoys relative to its competitors in the United States and North America.”

Under conditions in which some VW workers were making more than many new-hires at UAW-represented GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler plants, this committed the UAW to lowering the wages of Chattanooga workers in order to “enhance the cost advantages” of VW.

After the defeat, then-UAW President Bob King hailed Volkswagen management and IG Metall “for doing their

best to create a free and open atmosphere for workers to exercise their basic human right to form a union.”

Like the US automakers, VW has long relied on the collusion of IG Metall—which holds half of the seats on its corporate supervisory board—to suppress opposition. The German auto union has not only supported the slashing of jobs, it helped draft the notorious Future Pact 2016, which led to the destruction of 30,000 jobs around the world, including 23,000 in Germany.

In exchange, IG Metall officials have been rewarded handsomely. As chairman of the joint works council of the Volkswagen Group, union official Bernd Osterloh is paid \$840,430 (€750,000) a year.

The UAW is set to begin talks next month on new labor agreements for 155,000 General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers in the US, whose contracts expire on September 14. Amid signs of looming economic recession, automakers and their Wall Street investors are determined to impose even more devastating givebacks.

In particular, they are targeting health care benefits and whatever limitations are left to the conversion of workers into low-paid, casual laborers without the slightest job protection. The UAW is committed to doing everything in its power to enforce management’s dictates.

“We’re returning to major concession negotiations in the auto industry,” Gary Chaison, professor emeritus of industrial relations at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, told Bloomberg News. “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.”

After suffering a 25 percent loss in real wages since 2002, autoworkers are determined to fight back. The auto companies have made 10 straight years of record profits since the restructuring of the auto industry by the Obama administration, which halved the wages of new-hires. Over the last five years, GM has spent \$25 billion on stock buybacks and dividend payments to the benefit of its richest investors.

A major battle is brewing not just between autoworkers and the corporations, but between rank-and-file autoworkers and the UAW. Every worker knows that the UAW will bring back a pro-company contract, just as it did in 2015 and countless times before.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* has issued the call for autoworkers to take the contract fight into their own hands by forming rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the UAW and democratically controlled by workers themselves. These committees should outline their own demands, including the abolition of two-tier wages and the conversion of all part-time workers into full-timers, and

prepare for a national strike.

Autoworkers around the world face the same struggle. The auto giants are carrying out a global restructuring of their operations, which includes new mergers, plant closings and mass layoffs of production and salaried workers.

Against the international strategy of the capitalists, workers require their own international strategy. This means breaking from the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions and unifying in a common struggle.

The powerful struggle earlier this year by the maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico, who revolted against the unions, formed independent strike committees and marched to the US border to appeal to their American counterparts, showed the striving of workers to link together their struggles across borders.

The UAW and the other pro-capitalist and nationalist unions cannot be reformed. New organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees, are needed to coordinate the growing resistance of the working class to exploitation and social inequality.

The developing struggles of auto workers and other sections of the working class must be guided by a new political strategy, based on the international unification of the working class and the fight for the socialist reorganization of economic and political life.

The offensive of the ruling class is backed by both the Democrats and the Republicans. The Trump administration is spewing anti-immigrant poison to divide workers against each other as it demands a further massive redistribution of wealth to the rich. The Democrats, who presided over the restructuring of the auto industry under Obama, are no less committed to enforcing the demands of Wall Street.

The working class is confronting not just this or that employer, but an entire economic order. Workers must organize themselves as an independent political force to fight for workers’ power. Only in this way can the grip of the corporate and financial oligarchy be broken and the vast wealth created by the working class be used to satisfy human needs, not private profit.



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