

Why autoworkers need an international strategy

Jerry White
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With labor agreements expiring in mid-September for 155,000 workers at General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, autoworkers face critical questions of strategy and tactics for the contract battle.

After making huge profits by slashing jobs and wages, the auto corporations are doubling down. *Automotive News* recently reported that GM will demand a sharp increase in the number of low-paid contract workers along with deep cuts in health care when talks start July 16. GM executives have told Wall Street analysts they want 50 percent of the work done by temps.

The contract fight takes place as GM, Ford, VW and other auto giants are shutting plants and eliminating jobs around the world to cut costs and boost returns to investors. Fed up with falling real wages and endless demands for givebacks, workers are determined to fight back. Despite the closure threat, workers at Ford's Bridgend plant in Wales have voted overwhelmingly to strike, and there has been a rising tide of walkouts by auto and auto parts workers in China, Mexico, Brazil, Hungary and other countries.

The auto bosses are relying more than ever on their main weapon against the workers: their bribed lackeys in the United Auto Workers and the other auto unions. After GM announced its plant closings last November, the UAW and its Canadian counterpart Unifor pulled out their standard playbook for diverting and dividing the workers, calling for a boycott of "Mexican-made" cars while signaling to the company that they were prepared to sign another concessions contract under the pretense of "saving jobs." Never mind that this formula for treachery has not saved a single job over the course of four decades of plant closures, speedup and wage-cutting.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* has called on autoworkers to build rank-and-file factory committees to take the conduct of the contract fight into their own hands. We have urged that these committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves, demand oversight over all negotiations and ratification votes and link up across the country to prepare a national strike to win, among other things, a 40 percent pay raise, the elimination of all tiers, and the conversion of all contract and temporary workers into full-time employees.

At the heart of this program is the understanding that the fight against global corporations requires a global strategy. That is why the *Autoworker Newsletter* has stressed the need for autoworkers in every country to recognize the identity of interests of workers all over the world and reject all efforts to use nationalism to pit workers against each other.

This internationalist strategy separates the *Autoworker Newsletter* from the UAW and all of the auto unions. It is a basic dividing line between futile efforts to reform the UAW and the struggle to build new organizations of the working class to take on and defeat the transnational corporations and secure good-paying jobs, decent wages and democratic workers' control over production and health and safety conditions for all workers.

This has opened up an important debate among autoworkers.

Many workers are familiar with Brian Keller, a Fiat Chrysler worker in Detroit who has won a following for his Facebook criticisms of the UAW bureaucracy and his refusal to be intimidated by the Solidarity House gang. The *Autoworker Newsletter* will defend Keller against any attacks by the misnamed "Solidarity House." That does not, however, alter our differences with his policies, which, we believe, would only lead autoworkers to a dead end.

In a recent post on his "UAW Real Talk" Facebook page, Keller states his agreement with President Trump's trade war policies and his witch-hunt against immigrant workers. While denouncing Trump as an "idiot," he says, "One thing he is smart on is the tariffs. If the product is not built in the United States, throw a 25-30 percent tariff on it. Bring those jobs back here."

He continues, "I am not into this global system. I am not into open borders. I am into a sovereign country. Each country has their own identity, and I believe in that. We don't need no more Europeans in this country. We don't need no more people from the (expletive) South—Mexico—in this country. We don't need more foreigners in this country. There are not enough jobs."

Well aware that such comments will provoke revulsion among many workers, Keller adds, "It is not about being a bigot and a racist. We got a lot of minorities in this country, we have a lot of veterans that are homeless, we have a lot of single mothers that are homeless because there just are not enough jobs. We don't need foreigners coming in here taking what belongs to the American people."

This is the line not only of the racist billionaire Trump, it is also the line of the UAW bureaucrats, whom Keller repeatedly denounces. It is a false and self-defeating line that plays right into the hands of the auto bosses.

What is the basic fallacy of this economic nationalism? It is this: It places the blame for the plight of workers in one country on workers in another country. It helps the global corporations divide the workers they exploit and pit them against each other. It is the

old slogan: Divide and rule!

Above all, it diverts attention from the real culprit: Capitalism.

If autoworkers are to fight successfully against powerful transnational corporations, they need the most advanced understanding, theory and strategy, not the most backward. Whether Keller likes it or not, the globalization of economic life is a reality. To believe that the world's productive forces can be crammed back within the confines of the nation-state is about as realistic today as the belief in the Middle Ages that the world was flat and the sun revolved around the earth.

Trade war has been tried before, with catastrophic results. After the 1929 Wall Street crash, the US government imposed tariffs on European and other foreign imports. Retaliatory measures by those countries led to a 70 percent collapse in US exports, the descent into the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler and the bloodbath of World War II. The danger that trade wars will lead to shooting wars, this time with nuclear weapons, is a nightmarish reality today.

There is no such thing as an “American-made” vehicle, any more than a Mexican or Chinese one. The iconic Ford Mustang is built in Flat Rock, Michigan with transmission parts from China, France, the UK and Mexico. The international integration of the labor of millions of workers all over the world gives the workers an immense advantage, if they understand how to utilize it. The fact that US workers are part of the international working class, connected through a globally integrated production and supply chain, gives them enormous power as long as they coordinate their struggles with their class brothers and sisters around the world.

When 70,000 Mexican workers in the border city of Matamoros defied their unions and went on strike earlier this year, their action immediately led to a shortage of steering wheels and other parts at Ford and Chrysler plants in the US and Canada. After rebelling against the pro-company unions and forming their own independent strike committees, they marched to the border with Brownsville, Texas and called on US workers to “wake up” and join them in the fight against the transnational corporations.

Are these the enemies of US autoworkers? The auto bosses, the union officials, the politicians and the corporate media did not think so, which is why they blacked out the strike wave so that US workers remained in the dark about what was going on just over the border. They were petrified that workers in the US would take their lead from their courageous brothers and sisters in Mexico and rebel against their own company-controlled unions in a cross-border struggle.

If American autoworkers launch a strike this fall, the Detroit-based companies will try to shift production to other countries to weaken the impact of the strike. In order to counter such an effort, US workers will have to appeal to workers in Mexico to take solidarity action. But how will that be possible if American autoworkers are associated with the anti-immigrant poison spewed out by Donald Trump and Stephen Bannon?

The American working class itself is made up of workers from around the world. When the industrial barons needed cheap labor to build their railroads and work their mines, mills and factories, they opened the borders and recruited laborers from China, Ireland, Italy, Hungary and many other countries. At the same

time, they stirred up anti-immigrant chauvinism, along with anti-black racism, to divide and terrorize workers into submission. We are not sure where Keller's grandparents are from, but it is worth remembering that Irish immigrants were blamed for stealing jobs and lowering wages, and signs reading, “Help Wanted. No Irish need apply,” were commonplace outside factories across the US.

During the wave of industrial struggles of the 1930s, the most class-conscious workers, above all those inspired by socialist ideals, explained that workers of every nationality, race, language and religion had the same class interests. Leaflets were published in multiple languages to unite workers from dozens of countries. There would not have been a Flint sit-down strike or a UAW without class conscious workers opposing the attempts of Father Coughlin and other fascists to spread racism and bigotry in the factories. The pioneers of the labor movement knew that scapegoating immigrants was a ploy of the class enemy that had to be implacably opposed.

It is not foreign workers who are destroying jobs, causing homelessness or robbing “our profits,” as Keller says. It is an economic system—capitalism—that enriches a handful of billionaires and multi-millionaires through the exploitation of the collective labor of workers on every continent. GM, Ford and VW are wiping out tens of thousands of jobs around the world and pouring billions into the bank accounts of their richest investors and corporate executives.

When the capitalists succeed in getting workers to fight over the scraps and cut each other's throats, they laugh all the way to the bank.

What is needed is class solidarity across all borders. Workers must take the giant industries, which have been built up by the labor of generations of workers, into their own hands and transform them into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the workers ourselves. The great advances in technology and the global division of labor must be used for the common good through the establishment of a scientifically planned world socialist economy to eliminate social inequality and guarantee a high living standard for all working people.

Instead of a fratricidal race to the bottom, the words of Karl Marx must guide the struggle of autoworkers: “Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!”

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