In photo op at GM picket line, Sanders promotes nationalism, covers for Democrats and UAW

Tom Hall
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Bernie Sanders put in a brief media appearance on the picket line at GM's Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant Wednesday morning. Roughly 100-200 marched on the picket line but very few were striking GM or other autoworkers. Most were UAW officials and members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) who were there to cheer on Sanders and pose for the cameras.

Sanders was the latest in a stream of Democratic presidential candidates to make cameos on the picket lines. He was preceded by Elizabeth Warren, who visited the same plant on Sunday, Joe Biden, Amy Klobuchar and Tim Ryan. In addition to bolstering their own poll numbers, Sanders and his colleagues are flocking to the picket lines to prop up illusions in the Democrats and the United Auto Workers union, which is working assiduously for the defeat of the strike.

While Democratic candidates claim to support the striking workers, the corporate-controlled party's real attitude towards the strike was summed up in a *New York Times* comment by Steven Rattner, Obama's "car czar" and architect of the Obama administration's bailout of GM and Chrysler in 2009 . "[U]nfortunately, when it comes to the manufacturing sector, where the United States faces global competition, restoring the generous pay and benefits that used to accompany these jobs becomes impossible without jeopardizing the jobs themselves." In other words, workers must accept industrial slavery in order to ensure the profits of the giant corporations.

In a brief four-minute speech, Sanders said nothing about the role of the Obama administration and the Democrats in forcing through, with the collusion of the UAW, everything that autoworkers are fighting against. The hated two-tier wage structure, which slashed wages for new hires in half, was expanded to all new hires by Obama during the 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler. The deal also wiped out more than 30,000 jobs, eliminated the eight-hour day and shifted the responsibility for future retiree health benefits from the companies to a union-controlled benefit fund. As a reward for their role in forcing through cuts, the Obama administration handed the UAW billions of dollars in GM stock through the new UAW-controlled retiree fund.

Obama continued his attack on autoworkers in the Affordable Care Act in 2010, which was aimed at pushing workers off employer-sponsored plans. It provided for a punitive 40 percent excise tax on higher quality employer-sponsored plans, which is scheduled to take effect next year. The Democrats reference to this as the "Cadillac tax" made clear that autoworkers' healthcare plans are a primary target of the provision.

Sanders referred to the bailout briefly but neglected to name its author or its results. "You've got a corporation that received a $50 billion bailout when the economy went south. You've got a corporation that has made $35 billion in profits in the last three years. You've got a corporation that has paid its CEO $22 million in compensation. You've got a corporation that provided $25 billion in stock buybacks," he said.

After his speech, WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* editor Jerry White asked Sanders: "But didn't the two-tier wage system get imposed by Obama and the Democratic Party? Wasn't it your party that slashed wages in the 2009 bailout?" Sanders did not reply.

Sanders continued the anti-Mexican nationalism that has long been his stock-in-trade. Workers "are tired of working in factories for decades and waking up one day and seeing that factory moved to Mexico, where workers are paid $3 an hour," Sanders said. "What we are saying today to General Motors is start investing in your workers, stop cutting healthcare, stop threatening pensions, pay your workers a decent wage, stop shutting down plants in America and moving abroad."

But Sanders made no mention of the fact that Mexican workers are engaged in a struggle against the same giant auto corporations and support the GM strikers in the United

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States. Several workers at GM's plant in Silao, Mexico have been victimized for refusing to accept an increase in production during the strike and issuing statements of support for US autoworkers in a recent call-in meeting sponsored by the *Autoworker Newsletter*. Nor did he mention the strikes over the past month by GM workers in South Korea.

Instead, Sanders presented the strike as entirely the product of American conditions. "What is going on here is going on all over America," he said. By enforcing the national isolation of US autoworkers, Sanders is only strengthening the hands of GM and the UAW, which have long used national divisions to force through concessions.

United Auto Workers and its counterparts in Canada, Mexico and around the world play the key role in enforcing these divisions. All of the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions responded to globalization by insisting that workers accept cuts in the name of defending their "own" corporations. From the first Chrysler bailout of 1979 onwards, the UAW insisted that workers accept one concession after another, claiming this would "save" jobs and workers would recoup their losses once the companies became profitable.

But not a single job has been defended and the concessions have never ended. During the last major strike against GM—the 67-day national walkout in 1970—there were 460,000 workers. Since then the number has fallen by almost 90 percent to around 48,000.

Sanders opposes an internationally coordinated struggle against General Motors because it would threaten the foundations of American and world capitalism, which Sanders, in spite of his "democratic socialist" pretensions, defends. Sanders has explicitly rejected suggestions that he support placing the banks and major corporations under social ownership, an elementary socialist principle. Instead, Sanders declared in his speech that workers should "want companies in this country to be decent corporate citizens, to treat their workers with respect and dignity."

The most grotesque lie that Sanders peddled was that the UAW was waging a titanic struggle to defend the interests of autoworkers. In reality, the UAW never wanted the strike. The UAW *agrees* with all of the company's demands for health care cuts, the expansion of temporary work and maintaining the two-tier system and has actively colluded with management to impose the conditions in contract after contract.

But the UAW tops, who have been exposed as corrupt stooges of management, understood they could not ram through another pro-company contract without a revolt by workers. They chose to call a strike in an effort to regain some credibility, while at the same time isolating the strike—by refusing to call out Ford and Chrysler workers—and putting striking workers on starvation rations of $250 a week in strike pay.

There is growing support for the call by the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* for GM workers to form rank-and-file strike committees to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands and expand the strike throughout the auto and auto parts industry and unify in a common struggle with Canadian, Mexican, Korean and other workers around the world. These committees must formulate their own demands based not on what the corporations, the UAW and the big-business politicians claim is affordable but what is needed by workers and their families.

Fearing such a development, Sanders and the other potential Democratic presidential candidates have rushed to the picket lines to try to reassert the control of the UAW, which has played a central role in suppressing the class struggle and facilitating the decades-long social counterrevolution waged by both big-business parties.

Sanders did not breathe a word about the ongoing corruption probe into the UAW, which has exposed the union as a criminal syndicate that received hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes in exchange for concessions. He ended his speech by calling on GM to "sit down with the UAW [and] negotiate a contract that is fair for the working people of this company"—an absurdity, given that the two sides have met every day since the strike began to find a way to smother opposition and force through concessions.

Particularly in recent years, Sanders has made a focus of running damage control for the UAW apparatus whenever its stranglehold over autoworkers is threatened. Only months after a rank-and-file rebellion by autoworkers against the concessions contract in 2015, Sanders held a rally at Local 600 in Dearborn, where the national Ford contract narrowly "passed" amid widespread intimidation, voting irregularities and allegations of fraud.

Last year, Sanders invited UAW-FCA Vice President Cindy Estrada to a town hall forum on income inequality. By that time, Estrada had already been implicated in the federal corruption probe—since then, her former top lieutenant Mike Grimes has been indicted—but Sanders held her up as a genuine representative of the American working class.

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