

The expanding UAW corruption scandal and the case for rank-and-file committees

Tom Hall**8 November 2019**

Autoworkers in the United States confront an extraordinary situation. The United Auto Workers is currently attempting to push through a contract at Ford, modeled on an agreement used to shut down the strike at General Motors late last month. The overwhelming “no” vote by workers at Ford’s Chicago Assembly plant Wednesday demonstrates the determination of auto workers to fight.

At the same time, the president of the UAW, Gary Jones, faces imminent criminal charges for stealing workers’ dues money, as part of a widening corruption scandal that has already taken down many top executives and functionaries.

The case for the formation of independent organizations, rank-and-file committees, to represent the interests of workers could not be clearer. Workers have in the UAW not a workers’ organization, but an association of criminals who benefit from the increased exploitation of the workers they claim to represent.

The latest indictment against Jones reads like the script to a new installment of *The Godfather*. In conversations apparently caught by hidden recording devices or a wiretap, Jones and his associates discuss how to cover up the theft of member dues, at one point promising a close associate that his family would be “taken care of” if he took the fall.

The week before the UAW called the strike at GM, in order to soften up workers for their planned sellout by starving them on the picket line, the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* wrote: “If they are negotiating anything, it is their plea bargains.” The latest developments show that this was not a rhetorical exaggeration but expressed the actual preoccupations of the bureaucracy.

The GM contract and, if the UAW forces them through over massive opposition, the contracts at Ford and Fiat Chrysler, should be considered by autoworkers to be null and void. These contracts and those that preceded them

have been presided over by a corrupt apparatus that is now known to have stolen millions of dollars in dues money, which supplemented tens of millions in company bribes laundered through the UAW-company joint training centers.

The corruption of the UAW, as significant as it is, is not the cause of the sellouts. It is the product of the social function and form of the trade unions, and the way in which the unions responded to the offensive of the ruling class that began more than four decades ago.

As David North, chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, explained in 1998, the divergence of the real operations of the unions from their theoretical function as defensive organizations of the working class is “the outcome of the socioeconomic function of the trade union. Standing on the basis of capitalist property relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt a hostile attitude towards the class struggle.

“Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labor-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus-value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obligated to guarantee that their members supply their labor-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts.”

The defense of capitalist legality, however, means the suppression of class struggle. “That is why the trade unions ultimately undermine their ability to achieve even the limited aims to which they are officially dedicated.” (“Why are the Trade Unions Hostile to Socialism?”)

The hostility of the unions to class struggle is closely connected to their nationalist perspective. In each country, the unions work to defend “their own” national section of capitalists from foreign competition and scapegoat workers in other countries as the cause of layoffs and wage cuts.

The nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions responded to the decline of American capitalism and the right-wing shift of the ruling classes in the 1970s and 1980s by actively collaborating with management to isolate strikes, victimize militant workers and artificially suppress all opposition to the growth of social inequality.

It has now been four decades since the UAW first joined the Chrysler board of directors and began aiding the companies in firing tens of thousands of workers, starting with the most militant. In the mid-1980s, the UAW began the process of establishing joint union-company structures, integrating itself ever more closely into the framework of corporate management on the basis of the doctrine of corporatism, that is, the supposed identity of the interests of management and workers.

This nexus was embodied in the transformation of the UAW into “UAW-GM,” “UAW-Ford” and “UAW-Chrysler.” The identity of interests, however, was not between the workers and management, but between the UAW and management—against the workers. The naked corruption of the UAW executives, the ease with which money and gifts pass between the company and the union, is because the two organizations are on the same side.

Over the last half-century, there have been no shortage of reform caucuses within the unions—Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), Miners for Democracy, Steelworkers Fightback, the UAW New Directions caucus—whose stated aim was to “democratize” the union or oppose corruption and “bureaucratism.” But every one of them, where they have gained positions, has succeeded only in creating a new generation of bureaucrats who are, if anything, even more hostile to the interests of workers than the previous one.

Those who claim today that everything would be different if only they were placed in Solidarity House and given control over the vast financial resources of the bureaucracy are perpetrating the same fraud which workers have seen again and again.

Workers should be doubly suspicious of any would-be reformers praised in the pages of the *Detroit Free Press* and other corporate media. The authors of such fluff pieces put forward self-anointed “reformers” in an attempt to keep workers shackled to the UAW.

Particularly insidious are declarations that workers must continue paying dues to the UAW. In plain language, this means that workers must continue to financially support the lifestyle to which the bureaucracy is accustomed, replete with endless golf junkets, champagne tailored to the tastes of private tsars and winter villas, while

autoworkers are forced to starve on the picket line.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call for the formation of independent rank-and-file factory committees. Such committees will naturally exclude all current and former union officials and be organized and led by workers from the shop floor, with no full-time officials or bureaucrats.

As opposed to the unions, which uphold “management rights,” including the supposed “right” to make a profit, rank-and-file committees begin with the rights and needs of the working class, which are fundamentally incompatible with the interests of the capitalists. Such committees, once they are established, will function as a means through which workers will exercise control over production and establish genuine industrial democracy.

Finally, rank-and-file committees will be based on the principle of internationalism and the identity of the interests of all workers. The groundswell of mutual support during the GM strike between American and Mexican autoworkers shows that the interests of the working class are the same in every country, and workers in different countries have been bound together more than ever by global production and share a common fate.

The organization of such committees will not happen spontaneously. They must be prepared and guided by a nucleus of the most dedicated and class-conscious workers, who have already begun to work through the fundamental questions of perspective.

Above all, what is required is that a decisive section of workers have been educated in the principles of socialism, the antipode to the corporate toadying of the UAW. The history of the class struggle shows that the presence of even a small cadre of socialist-minded workers has vast implications for the outcome of the struggles of hundreds of thousands.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* stand ready to assist workers who are prepared to take this necessary first step. Contact us today at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact