

# Lessons of the US autoworkers' struggle of 2019

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8 January 2020

The struggle of autoworkers at General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler (FCA) in the United States in 2019 represented a major strategic experience of the working class, both in the US and internationally. The events of the past year require a careful study in order to prepare for the struggles ahead.

Of particular importance was the 40-day strike by 48,000 workers at General Motors, which began in mid-September. It was the first major national auto strike in the US in four decades and marked the mass entry of the industrial working class into the growing wave of strikes and protests in the United States.

The strike was betrayed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, which only called the walkout because it was under immense pressure from the workers determined to win back wages and benefits lost in decades of UAW-backed concessions and stop the closure of plants in Michigan, Ohio and other states. The anger of the workers against the UAW was compounded by a massive corruption scandal involving the UAW president and his predecessor as well as other top union officials for taking company bribes and embezzling dues money. Deeply discredited and facing a rank-and-file rebellion, the UAW felt it had no alternative but to call a strike.

From day one, the UAW worked to isolate and wear down workers in order to force through management's demands. At GM, the UAW ratified the closure of three plants, including the historic Lordstown Assembly plant in northeast Ohio, and sanctioned the expanded use of temporary workers. New labor-management committees responsible for implementing new technologies and cutting health care costs provide a mechanism for the even more direct integration of the union into management.

That the strike was called at all, however, shows that the ability of the unions to suppress the class struggle is being challenged by the growth of militant opposition in the working class. But in the end, the union did not yield to the demands of autoworkers, but fought with even greater determination to betray them. This proves that, to carry their struggles forward, workers must break with the United Auto Workers and form new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees.

Around the world, workers are fighting back against social inequality. In 2019, millions of workers throughout the world, from France to Chile to Lebanon and India took part in strikes and social protests. The ruling class is responding in every country with a turn toward authoritarian and far-right politics, police repression and censorship, demonstrating that the working class is

engaged in a political struggle against the capitalist system itself.

These struggles are unfolding as a unified international process. The resistance of workers in one country inspires resistance and active support from workers in other countries, who instinctively recognize the struggles of workers in other countries as their own. Marx's famous phrase, "Workers of the World, Unite!" is becoming a practical reality.

Among the most powerful examples is the stand taken by the Mexican GM workers who organized their co-workers to defend the striking GM workers in America. In response, GM fired several workers at the plant in Silao. These workers have received powerful support from their brothers and sisters in the US and around the world.

The ability of US workers to establish contact with the Silao Seven was due above all to the role of the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*. Throughout the strike and the contract votes, the *Autoworker Newsletter* broke through the union-enforced information blockade and provided autoworkers with a voice. Tens of thousands of autoworkers read the extensive coverage, analysis and interviews with workers published by the *Autoworker Newsletter*. Hundreds of autoworkers in the US, Canada and Mexico, together with workers from other industries, took part in online discussion forums organized by the *Autoworker Newsletter*.

In the contract battles of 2019, the Big Three US giants operated on the basis of an international strategy. Under conditions of a worldwide manufacturing recession and slowdown in global sales, and intensified competition for market share amid rising trade war tensions, the auto bosses and the Wall Street investors behind them are embarked on an international restructuring of the global auto industry.

This is bound up with the transition from internal combustion engines to electric cars and autonomous vehicles, which involve fewer moving parts and less labor to build—a shift that the head of Daimler has called the greatest revolution in the auto industry since Henry Ford's assembly line.

Technological advances such as electric components, artificial intelligence and additive manufacturing, freed from the constraints of the profit motive and national rivalries, could be harnessed to reduce the work week and improve workers' quality of life. Under capitalism, however, they are used to ramp up the exploitation of workers.

The ability of the UAW to force through management's diktats

was not due to a lack of militancy or determination among the workers. Near-unanimous strike authorization votes held over the summer at all three companies demonstrated the resolve of autoworkers to fight back. The GM workers remained solid despite the union's starvation strike pay of \$250 (out of a \$760 million strike fund) and workers at all three companies made clear that they supported a united strike, which the UAW resolutely opposed.

Once it became clear that the UAW was determined to impose another sellout, workers did not see a way forward. Many expressed their opposition to the bogus "ratification" process by boycotting the vote altogether. Far more workers voted against the contracts or abstained than those who voted for them.

The betrayal by the UAW is not simply the result of the corruption of individual union officials—as disgusting and criminal as their conduct is. It is the result of the nationalist, pro-capitalist program upon which the trade unions are based, and their subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party, which no less than Trump and the Republicans, is a party of the ruling class.

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the UAW's class hostility to autoworkers than its promotion of "America First" chauvinism. While refusing to even acknowledge the sacrifice made by the Silao Seven in defense of the GM strike, the UAW demanded that production be shifted from Mexico to the US—in other words, that thousands of Mexican workers lose their jobs. This kind of fratricidal struggle against fellow workers in other countries goes hand in hand with concessions to the US auto giants to prop up their profits. At the same time, the UAW has not lifted a finger to defend GM workers at Flint Assembly and other plants who have been fired in retaliation for their social media posts.

Those who counsel autoworkers to "re-take" the UAW through changes to the union's constitution or the direct election of new leaders, are concealing the truth from workers and, more often than not, looking for their own well-paying posts within the union apparatus.

No less dangerous are illusions that federal receivership of the UAW, along the lines of the takeover of the Teamsters in the 1980s, will create the conditions for the democratic "reform" of the union. Such a maneuver, either by the Trump administration or a Democratic successor, would be aimed at reviving the tattered credibility of the UAW and reinforcing its grip over workers.

For ability of the ruling class to maintain "labor peace" amid massive layoffs and wage and benefit cuts over the last 40 years has hinged on propping up the unions as management's industrial police force. The 2009 bailout of the auto industry under Obama, which boosted profits to record levels by slashing wages for all new-hires in half, was carried out with the UAW's collaboration, for which they were rewarded with billions in GM stock.

The role of the Obama administration was conveniently omitted by the Democratic Party presidential candidates, including self-styled "progressive" Elizabeth Warren and the "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders, in their photo-op appearances on the picket line during the GM strike.

It is not enough to complain about the rotten character of the UAW—workers must dedicate themselves to the building of a new leadership in the working class, which is completely independent

of and in opposition to the UAW. The form this struggle must take is *rank-and-file factory committees* — fighting, democratic organizations, which are led by the most trusted shop-floor militants, controlled by the ranks and committed to mobilizing the immense social power of autoworkers and other sections of the working class. These committees will take as their starting point, not what the corporations are willing to accept, but what workers and their families need.

The fightback of autoworkers requires the adoption of a new political strategy, beginning with a break with the Democratic Party and the capitalist two-party system. The industrial mobilization of workers must be accompanied by the independent political organization of the working class in struggle against the entire capitalist class and all of its political representatives.

The antipode to the nationalism, class collaboration and corporatism of the unions is socialism, based on an understanding that the class struggle of the working class inevitably leads to a revolution struggle by the working class to take the reins of political and economic power into its own hands. The private ownership of the major corporations and the arbitrary national divisions of the world must be abolished in order to organize economic life in a rational and genuinely democratic way to meet the interests of the vast majority, not the wealthy few.

The 2019 contracts are not the end, but the beginning. The intolerable conditions created by the contracts will generate deep dissatisfaction among autoworkers. A critical factor in the future struggles will be the highly exploited, mostly younger temporary workers, thousands of whom will enter the plants over the course of the current contracts. The coming struggles in the factories will more and more merge with the fight against war and the threat to democratic rights.

The success of rank-and-file committees will depend on the degree to which workers have been educated and politically trained as socialists. The history of the class struggle in the US and around the world has shown that a key section of politically and class-conscious workers can play a decisive role in guiding the struggles of tens of millions.

Autoworkers cannot afford to wait another four years. They must move now and begin organizing themselves. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are doing everything to assist workers in building a new leadership. If you agree with this perspective and want to participate in this fight, contact us at [autoworkers@wsws.org](mailto:autoworkers@wsws.org).



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