

UAW quashes effort to force direct election of union officers

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22 February 2020

The United Auto Workers (UAW) leadership has quashed a bid by the UAWD (Unite All Workers for Democracy) to force a special convention to amend the union constitution so as to allow for the direct election of top officers.

The UAWD was formed amidst the exposure of pervasive corruption in the UAW leadership, including a number of international officers. Former UAW President Gary Jones was forced to resign in disgrace in the midst of the national auto contract negotiations and his successor Rory Gamble is under investigation for taking massive kickbacks.

The sellout of last year's forty-day strike by General Motors workers, blatantly betrayed by the UAW, has further outraged workers. The contract, imposed on the workers by starving them out with a miserable strike pay of \$250 a week, contains paltry wage increases and allows the company to increase its use of super-exploited temporary and contract workers.

Scott Houldieson, former vice president of UAW Local 551 at Chicago Ford Assembly, said in a media post that UAWD had failed to achieve the minimum requirement for a special convention of endorsement by at least 15 UAW locals with a total membership of 80,000. By the February 21 deadline, UAWD had secured the support of 25 locals, but with a total membership of only a little more than 60,000.

UAWD is largely a creation of the Labor Notes group in alliance with the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left organizations. The aim of those who spearheaded its formation and continue to control it is to prop up the UAW apparatus, under conditions of an incipient rank-and-file revolt. Labor Notes has a long history of attempting to deflect working class opposition to the betrayals of the trade union bureaucracy by channeling workers' efforts behind

appeals to disaffected factions of the union bureaucracy.

UAWD is entirely oriented to certain organizational reforms in the existing structure of the union. Its main demand is for the holding of a special constitutional convention to amend the UAW constitution so as to require that all International Executive Board members be elected by direct vote of the members, rather than the current delegate system, under which the union's top officers are elected by the delegates to its constitutional convention, generally held once every four years.

The fact that UAWD was able to secure passage of resolutions at a number of local union meetings, including locals whose officials oppose the measure, is an indication of a significant degree of rank-and-file support. While those playing a leading role in UAWD include a number of lower-level UAW officials, such as Houldieson, the demand for direct elections has attracted sympathy from many rank-and-file workers outraged by the bureaucratic tactics of the UAW.

Autoworkers have every right to vote directly for the top officers of the union, as opposed to the anti-democratic procedure in the UAW whereby the president and other international officials are elected by hand-picked delegates to the union's constitutional convention. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* fight for the defense of the democratic rights of workers within the unions. But the anti-worker character of the United Auto Workers cannot be changed by a constitutional amendment. Nor can the organization, controlled by a right-wing layer of executives who get a share of the profits sweated from the workers in return for imposing the companies' demands, be reformed.

For the last four decades, the UAW has imposed one

concessions agreement after another, suppressed strikes and betrayed them when they broke out, and collaborated in the elimination of hundreds of thousands of jobs. In the process, communities such as Detroit and Flint, Michigan, have been devastated. Detroit, once called the Paris of the Midwest, is now the poorest big city in America, with collapsing schools and infrastructure.

The SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* advocate the building of rank-and-file factory committees independent of the pro-company UAW as the genuine voice of the workers. These rank-and-file committees should draw up a list of demands based on what the workers need, not what the companies say they can afford. They should form networks of contact between workers across the auto industry both in the US and internationally, and with other sections of workers coming into struggle such as teachers, steelworkers and health care workers.

Within the factories, these committees should strive to assert workers' control over health and safety and line speed. They should counterpoise to the dictatorship of management the independent interests of the workers.

The bureaucratic rejection of the call for a special constitutional convention is a rebuke to the claims of UAWD, Labor Notes and *Jacobin* magazine that the UAW can be reformed. However, far from drawing any lessons from this experience, Houldieson lamely announced that UAWD would try again in the spring of 2021.

He did not explain what autoworkers should do in the meantime, as the auto bosses, in collaboration with the UAW leadership, impose further job cuts, speedup, victimizations and abuse of temporary and part-time workers.

In the final analysis, the degeneration of the UAW into a bribed tool of management is not simply the result of corrupt leaders, but of the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of the unions.

The anti-democratic character of the UAW cannot be separated from its program, which is based on the defense of the profit system and the national interests of US corporations and the capitalist state. Genuine democracy is incompatible with the defense of class exploitation. The ruling class exercises a dictatorship over society through its control of the means of

production.

Labor Notes and the DSA base their efforts to “reform” the UAW on the most narrow and parochial considerations, never referring to the great political questions confronting the working class—the continuing international upsurge of the class struggle, the mounting threats to democratic rights, including the attacks on immigrants and the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, the danger of war, Trump’s efforts to create a fascist movement, and signs of a possible economic collapse.

Without a consideration of these broader questions, it is impossible for the working class to define its own independent interests. Labor Notes’ efforts to keep “politics” out of the working class is really a defense of capitalist politics and opposition to genuine socialist politics. It and the DSA have politics, based on the subordination of the working class to the imperialist Democratic Party and the nationalist and corporatist trade unions.

The fight by the SEP and the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* for the formation of rank-and-file factory committees presupposes the broadest workers’ democracy. Within these committees the SEP fights for a socialist and internationalist program as the basis for the unification of the working class against the depredations of the transnational corporations.

We urge workers interested in learning more about rank-and-file committees and the program of the SEP to contact us at autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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