

The UAW's Juneteenth stunt

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The United Auto Workers (UAW), working in conjunction with Ford, GM and other automakers, has called on factory workers and other union members to “stand down” for eight minutes and forty-six seconds at 8:46 am today to “reflect” on the police murder of George Floyd, the African American worker suffocated to death by a Minneapolis cop on May 25.

June 19, also known as Juneteenth, marks the final emancipation of slaves in Texas, the last holdout of the Southern slaveholders, on June 19, 1865.

In a letter to UAW members Tuesday, UAW President Rory Gamble called the killing of Floyd “yet another tragedy in a long and sorrowful history of the divisiveness of racism in this nation.” Since the killing, Gamble added, “we have seen Americans from all walks of life, black, brown and white, stand together to demand change. To demand – finally – that we address the systemic racial divide that has plagued our nation since its inception.”

Workers inside the plants, regardless of their skin color or ethnic background, are, of course, disgusted and outraged over the brutal murder of Floyd. Many autoworkers and their families have joined the demonstrations in Detroit and other cities across the country against police killings.

Among workers, however, there is extreme and justified suspicion over anything the UAW is involved in. Most correctly view today's event as a publicity stunt aimed at providing a cover for corrupt union officials and corporate management. After all, the real attitude of the UAW and the companies towards the rights and well-being of workers of all colors is summed up in the fact that they are forcing workers to labor in infected factories in the midst of a pandemic.

Indeed, since its racist anti-Japanese campaigns in the early 1980s, the promotion of bigotry and xenophobia has been a key means by which the UAW has sought to divert workers' anger away from the exploitation of the

auto companies towards the alleged competition of “foreign” workers and immigrants.

The UAW blacked out the strikes and protests in Mexico over the past year. Even as autoworkers in Matamoros and Silao appealed to their American brothers and sisters for support, the UAW doubled down on its demands that the auto companies protect “American” jobs by closing factories in Mexico and laying off thousands of Mexican workers.

If the UAW has suddenly “discovered” its opposition to discrimination, it is only in order to use race to divert workers' anger along harmless, officially sanctioned forms of protests which separate the question of police violence from the class structure of society.

As one young autoworker recently told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The murder of Floyd is a metaphor for a system that is putting pressure on us so we can't breathe until all the life is sucked out us ... The crisis we face is not about a particular race. It's about the way the system continues to exploit workers and strip us of our rights so the rich capitalists can control every aspect of our lives.”

Gamble was careful to note that the UAW was working with the auto bosses and other employers “to facilitate peaceful and orderly stand downs,” which would minimize the loss of production and profits. “Please do not stop work unless authorized,” Gamble instructed workers, adding, “Some must care for patients or engage with customers. Please do not abandon patients or customers.”

According to CNBC, “General Motors President Mark Reuss, in a letter to employees after Gamble's message, said the automaker's factory employees, including UAW members, as well as salaried employees were being encouraged to participate in moments of silence based on their work schedules. That included at 8:46 a.m. and 8:46 p.m. for moments of silence of 8 minutes and 46 seconds.” A spokesman for

Ford confirmed the participation of its employees, while Fiat Chrysler had not yet commented, CNBC said.

In his statement Gamble was careful not to criticize the police, choosing instead to echo the Democratic Party politicians in Detroit, Atlanta, Washington, DC and other cities that blame police violence—which claims the lives of 1,000 people, disproportionately minority, but mostly white and all poor—on “systemic racism.”

The aim of this is to conceal the real role of the police in capitalist society, i.e., as the defenders of the wealth and power of the super-rich minority against the working class majority.

In fact, earlier this month, Gamble explicitly defended the police, saying in a statement that his comments on the Floyd murder were “not to vilify our brave men and women in blue. We represent many police officers and they are truly untold heroes who go to work every day to keep all of us safe...But in this case, things went terribly wrong, and we must look at this issue as a nation.”

The UAW is not the only union trying to cover itself by marking Juneteenth. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which held a nine-minute protest the day of Floyd’s funeral on June 9, has called for an eight-hour work stoppage at 29 West Coast ports Friday. The union made it clear that the “stop work meeting” was approved by the Pacific Maritime Association and included in the ILWU-PMA contract.

According to a PMA letter sent earlier this week to its associated employers, the temporary work stoppage would involve the “first shift only” and not “passenger ships, essential military cargo, DST rail, and emergencies.” Moreover, the union agreed to not starting the work stoppage until an hour after the first shift started, it said, in order “to finish and sail vessels and to complete the 8-hour guarantee for 7:00 p.m. vessel starts” pursuant to its contract with the ILWU.

The protests organized by the unions are nothing more than empty stunts aimed at covering over the their role as instruments of corporate management and the state. In the conflict between the financial oligarchy and the working class, in which the police are used to enforce the dictates of the rich, the unions stand entirely on the side of the financial oligarchy.

This is why workers must break with the unions and build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees. These organizations, democratically controlled by workers themselves, will unite the struggle against unsafe conditions with the fight against police violence and the attacks of democratic rights in general. This should be combined with a fight to abolish wage slavery, overthrow the rule of the capitalist class, and to establish a workers’ government and socialism.



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