The United Auto Workers: A criminal conspiracy against the working class

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7 August 2020

On Monday, General Motors submitted court documents showing that Fiat Chrysler gave United Auto Workers officials tens of millions of dollars in previously unreported bribes as part a massive criminal operation.

Private investigators working for GM have uncovered evidence of offshore bank accounts in Switzerland, Panama, Singapore, Lichtenstein and the Cayman Islands set up for the benefit of top UAW officials, including four of the last five UAW presidents. The secret accounts were part of a sophisticated scheme by Fiat Chrysler to funnel millions of dollars in illegal payments to union officers for their services in betraying workers.

These revelations point to a scale and extent of corruption within the UAW even greater than the findings of the federal investigation into bribery and kickbacks. So far, that investigation has led to the conviction of more than a dozen people, mostly UAW and Fiat Chrysler management officials.

The list of UAW officials now serving jail time includes former UAW President Gary Jones and former UAW vice presidents Joe Ashton and Norwood Jewell. Acting UAW President Rory Gamble is also under federal investigation for taking kickbacks.

GM launched the investigation as part of an attempt to reopen its lawsuit against FCA, claiming the payments to the UAW gave its rival an unfair advantage in contract negotiations. If GM felt it had to go to the courts, it is because the UAW's corruption grew to such an extent that it undermined its own corporate interests.

The new court filings include evidence that Ashton served as a direct agent of FCA on the GM Board of Directors as part of a scheme codenamed Operation Cylinder aimed at forcing GM into a merger with FCA.

However, the real victim of this conspiracy was not GM, but the workers, who suffered devastating job losses and concessions.

Revealed in these documents is the fact that the UAW is not simply an agent of management in the exploitation of the working class, but direct participants and beneficiaries.

The bribery operation took place on a vast scale, with millions of dollars funneled through a sophisticated system of hiding transactions. The people doing this were not amateurs. For an operation of this size and sophistication, corruption is an inadequate term.

These documents expose the UAW as a criminal syndicate. If they are able to carry out crimes on this scale, who knows what else they are capable of? Suffice it to say that in 2018, a 21-year-old worker named Jacoby Hennings walked into a UAW office to make a complaint and did not walk out of the plant alive.

Criminality emerges from the very social being of this organization. These bribes were not an accident, a wart on an otherwise healthy organization. A whole system of oppression and exploitation finds its expression in these crimes.

As early as 1984 the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (US), pointed to the development of corporatism in the UAW, warning of a parallel to Mussolini's labor syndicates in fascist Italy. At that time, the UAW openly embraced the principle of union-management collaboration.

This led to the setting up of various joint programs and joint training centers, starting in the mid- to late 1980s, that served as a conduit for the funneling of corporate cash into the coffers of the UAW to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Corporatism grew naturally out of the nationalist and

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pro-capitalist program of the unions. Under conditions of the increasingly globally integrated character of production, the national-based strategy of achieving reforms proved worthless. In response, the UAW served up racist anti-foreigner demagogy combined with unbridled support for American capitalism. The UAW suppressed strikes and any form of resistance by workers to increased exploitation.

During the 1980s the UAW and other unions—the United Steelworkers, United Mineworkers, Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers—isolated and betrayed one strike after another and agreed to massive concession contracts. By the early 1990s, it was clear that a qualitative change had taken place in the relation of the unions to the working class.

The Workers League concluded that the unions could no longer be called "workers organizations." The Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky, writing in the 1930s, said of the leaders of the old American Federation of Labor, "Should these gentlemen … defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed [in other words what the UAW and all unions do today] then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union."

This is precisely the role of the UAW and the unions as a whole today. They are in the truest sense "an organization of scabs."

For exposing this reality, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have come under relentless attack by all the middle-class groups of the pseudo-left such as the Democratic Socialists of America, *Jacobin Magazine* and Labor Notes.

Those who talk about the UAW and other unions as working-class organizations not only show themselves as completely removed from reality, but also display their indifference to the plight of workers who find themselves under the thumb of these gangsters.

All of the middle-class apologists for the unions stand exposed by the UAW's corruption. They have their own insidious relationship with this system of exploitation. In an objective sense, it serves their interests.

The new exposures further confirm the urgent need to build independent workplace and factory committees under the democratic control of workers.

The UAW is collaborating with the auto companies to suppress opposition to the return to full production at North American auto plants in the midst of a deadly pandemic, even as management has abandoned the most minimal safety protocols. This has led to hundreds of infections, with the actual count being covered up by management and the UAW. More than two dozen workers have died at plants operated by the Detroit automakers.

Workers should recall the fact that the temporary shutdown of North American auto production last March only came about through wildcat actions taken by workers in the US, Canada and Mexico in defiance of the unions.

The fight to build independent rank-and-file safety committees at plants and workplaces must be expanded. Workers should follow the initiative taken by autoworkers in the Detroit area at Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly, Sterling Heights Assembly, Toledo Jeep and the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant, where safety committees have already been established.

A national and global network of these committees must be built uniting autoworkers with logistics workers, transportation workers, teachers, service workers and all sections of the working class to prepare a general strike for safe workplace conditions and the shutdown of non-essential production until the pandemic is contained.

The fight against the homicidal policy of the ruling class in relation to the pandemic requires a fight against capitalism. It means a confrontation with the Trump administration and the whole corporate-backed two-party political setup in the US.

In this struggle, workers confront in the gangsters in the UAW their bitterest opponents.

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