

UAW seeks to deflect role in stoking anti-Asian hate with phony pledge to fight “xenophobia and racism”

Shannon Jones
6 June 2021

The ongoing anti-China campaign, escalated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, has reached a new pitch with the embrace by the Biden administration and corporate media of the Wuhan lab conspiracy theory.

The predictable result of this nationalist and jingoist agitation has been an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes, which have risen dramatically in recent months. While the Biden administration has hypocritically attempted to distance itself from the most inflammatory statements by fascistic elements in Congress, it is fully implicated.

This is equally true of the American trade unions. For decades they have played a leading role in the demonization of foreign workers, in particular Asians and Mexicans, for taking “American jobs,” while suppressing their own role in signing off on job losses and plant closures.

Anti-Asian prejudice alongside other forms of xenophobia directed against immigrants has a long and ugly history in the United States, going back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of the 19th century, enacted with the enthusiastic support of the American Federation of Labor. Exclusion laws targeted not just Chinese, but Japanese and other Asian immigrants, and were justified by the AFL in vile, racist terms based on the claim that Asians displaced white Americans workers.

Such reactionary agitation laid the basis for the forced internment of Japanese Americans, the majority who were US citizens, during World War II by the Roosevelt administration.

Among the worst offenders in recent decades has been the United Auto Workers union, whose anti-Japanese campaigns of the 1980s boiled over into violence.

Now, however, the UAW is trying to cover up its tracks by recently endorsing, along with other US unions, the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance’s pledge to end anti-Asian racism. The pledge supposedly commits unions to take “concrete actions” including addressing “racism and xenophobia in the workplace.”

In signing on to this pledge, the United Auto Workers

makes no effort to account for its record in promoting anti-foreigner and anti-Asian sentiment. But the targeting of foreign workers, which began in earnest in the 1980s, went hand in hand with the UAW’s imposition of concessions and the union’s embrace of corporatist union-management collaboration. Anti-foreigner scapegoating has been central to the narrative advanced by the UAW ever since.

Endless concessions are presented as necessary to ensure the competitiveness of the US-based auto companies against overseas rivals. This fratricidal logic leads to pitting US workers against their counterparts in Asia, Europe and Latin America in a continuing competition to undermine wages and working conditions in an endless downward spiral.

Over the same period, the unions have amassed billions of dollars in cash even as their dues base has collapsed. The UAW employs a small army of officials “earning” six-figure salaries, which are financed through direct infusions of corporate cash through joint labor-management training centers, the union’s control of corporate stock, and overt bribes of the type that have landed over a dozen union officials, including the last two union presidents Gary Jones and Dennis Williams, in prison.

The UAW has never taken responsibility for its role in the brutal 1982 murder of Chinese American draftsman Vincent Chin, who was beaten to death with a baseball bat in Highland Park, Michigan. The attack was carried out by a Chrysler foreman, Ronald Ebens, and his unemployed stepson, Michael Nitz, who mistook Chin for Japanese. One of the attackers yelled, “It’s because of you little (expletives) that we’re out of work!”

The murder of Chin took place in the midst of a vicious anti-Japanese campaign conducted by the UAW over mass layoffs. UAW officials declared “remember Pearl Harbor” and invited autoworkers to smash Japanese-built cars with a sledgehammer. To this day, foreign-built vehicles, primarily Japanese, are banned from UAW parking lots.

Ebens and Nitz never spent a day in prison for their crime.

A plea bargain reduced their sentence to three years probation for manslaughter and a token \$3,000 fine. After public outcry, a federal civil rights prosecution followed. However, Ebens' conviction was overturned on appeal.

In an interview with this reporter, conducted in 2012, James Shimoura, a Michigan attorney who provided legal advice to the mother of Vincent Chin, described the climate at the time of the killing.

"The rhetoric at the time was virulent. There were union leaders smashing Japanese cars with hammers and bats and there were public pronouncements by politicians and people in the corporate area targeting Japanese car manufacturers as being the cause of the recession. It was a campaign of disinformation to deflect public opinion away from the real cause, which was quite complex. At a time of a very hostile public reaction, you try to find scapegoats to deflect the anger."

Under conditions of mounting trade war, deepening economic crisis intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and war preparations, the ruling class, with the support of the unions, is ramping up all forms of racism and chauvinism.

The UAW has been in the lead on this, giving its full support to the Trump administration's trade war policies and America First demagogic and now embracing the Biden administration's Buy American campaign, which targets China as well as Mexico.

The Biden administration is directly enlisting the support of the UAW in prosecuting its anti-China campaign. At an appearance at the Ford River Electric Vehicle Center at the Rouge complex outside Detroit on May 18, Biden promoted his nationalist American Jobs Plan. He praised UAW President Rory Gamble by name while touting the role the unions must play in prosecuting economic warfare against China, which he accused of cornering the market on "raw materials and supplies" for electric vehicle batteries. Referring again to China he declared, "I got news for them: They will not win this race."

He also urged American automakers to "deepen your partnership with the UAW." In plain language, this means to "deepen" the incestuous financial ties between the union and the company in order to clamp down on mounting opposition among autoworkers and divert them along nationalist lines.

Whatever the pretensions of the UAW, the upsurge in anti-Asian hate crimes is a completely foreseeable, and indeed inevitable, outgrowth of its promotion of "America First" nationalism. Attacks on Asians can only increase in the period ahead after the embrace by the Democratic Party, with which the UAW is aligned, of the Wuhan lab conspiracy theory that claims China is to blame for the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore the loss of millions of

lives.

In reality, workers face a common global fight. This has been made crystal clear by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has confronted workers all over the world with the fact that corporations have demanded that workers' health and safety be sacrificed for the sake of profit.

Recently, Indian autoworkers have carried out strikes against unsafe working conditions as the COVID-19 pandemic rages in South Asia. Their courageous action underscores the fact that the fight to save workers' lives is a global fight against capitalism, which values profit above health and safety.

The struggle against nationalism is essential to the defense of even the most elementary rights of the working class. Workers, after all, confront transnational corporations that include workers all over the world in a single production process.

The most conscious expression of this is the rapid growth of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The IWA-RFC is a new form of workers' organization, independent of the corrupt, pro-corporate unions, based on an international strategy and perspective. It has representatives from workplaces all over the world and is seeking to unite workers globally to fight for their common interests.

In response to blackmail from the UAW to accept a concessions contract or be starved out on the picket line in a long a fruitless strike, workers in the rank-and-file committee at Volvo Truck's New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia declared in a statement: "Workers want to unite. If the enemy wants to wage war on us, we must be prepared to open up new fronts in their rear, including at Volvo's operations in Sweden, France, Belgium, the UK, and Poland."

To join the IWA-RFC and for help setting up a committee at your workplace, contact us at wsws.org/autoworkers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact