

Flint UAW local cancels anti-ICE protest

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A planned protest opposing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) outside the United Auto Workers Local 598 union hall in Flint, Michigan, which was set for Friday, February 27, was abruptly canceled by local union officials two days before the event.

The demonstration was called to oppose the deportations and the killings of Renée Nicole Good and ICU nurse Alex Pretti by federal agents in Minneapolis last month. The UAW Local 598 announcement of the protest, referring to Pretti, explained, “A union brother has been murdered, and we must unite against this injustice. We cannot remain silent as people are being taken, based on their skin color, without warrants, by unidentified masked men and women.”

The call for the protest reportedly generated widespread interest among autoworkers and beyond. Michigan is one of the states where the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has redeployed federal agents after its rampage in Minnesota, and plans for the building of detention centers and operational offices in the metropolitan Detroit area provoked mass protests last week. ICE agents arrested two Amazon Flex drivers at a Hazel Park warehouse and carried out traffic stops outside the GM plant in Hamtramck.

The hatred for Trump inside the auto plants was on display when Ford worker TJ Sabula denounced him as a “pedophile protector” as the president toured the Dearborn Truck Plant on January 13. Ford was forced to restore him to his job after massive outpouring of support.

In a note on the planned anti-ICE demonstration, UAW Local 598 officials acknowledged that the “response on social media has grown well beyond our expectation.” This was cited not to go ahead with the protest but to cancel it!

In a cancellation notice on its Facebook page, UAW officials continued:

The strong emotions this issue has generated—from both supporters and opponents—have drawn significant outside attention including individuals not associated with our local. Unfortunately, this attention has also attracted individuals who may see this as an opportunity to escalate tensions. Based on this, we have serious concerns about the safety of our members, family and community ... the risk of potential confrontation outweighs the purpose of the demonstration...

The Facebook post did not provide details of any specific threats that had caused the UAW to cancel the protest. Because of this, the WSWS contacted the offices of UAW Local 598 to get more information.

D’Andre Jackson, recording secretary of Local 598, told the WSWS that the protest was called off “due to threats of violence.” Jackson would not specify the source of these alleged threats or provide any details.

If there were threats of violence against a rally—where workers planned to exercise their freedom of speech and assembly to oppose the murder of a trade unionist and others—this must be taken with the utmost seriousness. UAW officials have an obligation to the 4,500 workers at the Flint Assembly Plant and the public at large to expose who made such threats.

Did these originate from elements close to the Republican Party, federal immigration agencies or local law enforcement? Were they issued by figures affiliated with right-wing extremist organizations?

Just last month, UAW President Shawn Fain stated that “fascism is on our doorstep” during his address at the UAW National Community Action Program (CAP) Conference in Washington D.C.

He continued:

They killed one of our union brothers, Alex Pretti, in Minneapolis for holding a cell phone. They have deported people for exercising their right to free speech. That’s not just wrong, it is an existential threat to our nation.

If you think it can’t happen to you, you’re fooling yourself. If you think that can’t happen on the UAW picket line. Because it was not that long ago that they were sending the National Guard to break our strikes, sending strikers to jail, hell they killed workers for fighting for better conditions.

All of that is entirely true. But Fain and the UAW bureaucracy have no intention of doing anything about it. While workers and young people in Minneapolis and across the country have pressed for a general strike against Trump’s danger of fascism and dictatorship—now accelerated by the criminal war against Iran—Fain urges workers to vote for the Democrats in the midterm elections, which if Trump has his way will be held under gunpoint. At the same time, Fain has dabbled in talk about a general strike—in 2028!

Given the duplicity of the UAW apparatus, equally plausible is that the reports of threats were concocted or at least exaggerated to cancel the rally because sections of the union bureaucracy feared it would encourage a further radicalization of the working class fed up with runaway living expenses, social inequality and Trump's dictatorial measures. This is being expressed in growing opposition to Fain and the UAW bureaucracy, who are aligned with Trump's illegal trade war measures and economic nationalism.

At the same time, there is no doubt support for ICE and Trump's witch-hunting of immigrants within broad sections of the UAW apparatus itself. The WSWS has long explained that the pathological hatred of socialism, virulent nationalism and corporatism of the UAW bureaucracy, along with its fear and hostility to the militancy of rank-and-file workers, has made it fertile ground for the development of ultra-right and fascist elements.

In any case, the cancellation of the rally was an exercise of complete cowardice. Fain refers to the deployment of National Guard to break strikes and the murder of striking workers. This year marks the 90th anniversary of the beginning of the Flint sit-down strikes when socialist-minded workers and left-wing militants took and defeated the largest corporation in the world.

It is a historical fact that the leaders of that movement, including Kermit and Genora Johnson, Sol Dollinger, Wyndham Mortimer and Ken Malone, waged a relentless fight against the Black Legion, the KKK and other fascist thugs mobilized by GM, along with local police and the National Guard deployed by Democratic Governor Frank Murphy. Central to this struggle was the fight to unite workers of all races and nationalities and to defeat the influence of fascist demagogues like the "radio priest" Father Coughlin, who railed against "immigrants," "Jews" and "communists" in a manner no different from Trump and his cabal today.

After the cancellation of the rally, several workers and community members turned to social media to denounce the spinelessness of the UAW bureaucracy. Many found particularly enraging the local union officials' claims that the "the risk of potential confrontation outweighs the purpose of the demonstration."

In response, one worker posted, "I hope the UNION remembers the SIT DOWN strike wasn't safe either but was [the] moment to take a stand against injustice. The MEMBERS are the union. And I believe some folks forget this!!"

Another said, "Organizing a rally to protest discriminatory actions in the community is no different than fighting the same discriminatory actions in the workplace. When we strike, we look for our communities to support us. It is now time to support our community."

Still another posted, "We always stood up for people not just our own members. Study the UAW history on Human Rights and Civil Rights."

GM workers who spoke to the WSWS also denounced the cancellation of the rally. One worker, "I don't agree that the anti-ICE protest was called off. ICE is terrible and should be abolished. Our taxes should not be funding them. The people making billions

and billions are the ones laying us off and cutting our wages. It's a con job. Our worsening conditions are not caused by the immigrants. We should not be duped. And now Trump has started a war against Iran. The deaths and economic blowback will be unfathomable."

Another GM worker told the WSWS, "Local 598 did not inform us, let alone do anything when ICE showed up near the Factory Zero plant. Many workers at Flint Truck and Bus oppose ICE. We would have attended the protest which was canceled. When federal agents appear near factory gates, the union does nothing. When workers attempt to organize resistance, the union shuts it down."

The contrast between Fain's rhetoric and lack of action is not accidental. Like the Democratic Party—the other party of the financial oligarchy to which the apparatus is closely tied—the union bureaucracy fears the independent mobilization of the working class. A genuine mass movement against ICE repression, rapidly declining living standards and war would quickly escape its control.

The chief obstacle to developing a unified struggle against repression and dictatorship is the union bureaucracy itself. That was demonstrated when officials from the AFL-CIO, CWA, the Teamsters, the teachers union and other unions insisted workers could not take part in what was called a general strike against Trump's reign of terror in Minneapolis because of the no-strike clauses written into the collective bargaining agreements they signed.

The despicable episode in Flint only underscores that the struggle against ICE terror, deportations and the criminal war against Iran must be organized independently of the bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, are needed to unite native-born and immigrant workers, link shop floor struggles to the defense of democratic rights and prepare coordinated industrial action.

This must be connected to a political struggle against both big business parties to end the dictatorship of the corporate and financial oligarchy whose very existence is incompatible with democracy and social equality.



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