

Trump’s “Department of War” seeks to enlist US auto companies in accelerated arms buildup

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Pentagon officials recently met with executives from General Motors and Ford, marking a turn by the Trump administration toward more the development of a war economy.

According to press reports, unnamed senior defense officials have held meetings with executives of major corporations about building military equipment, including Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, and Jim Farley, CEO of Ford. The Pentagon is reportedly seeking to replenish critical munitions and weapons systems that have been depleted due to the ongoing Ukraine proxy war against Russia, the Gaza genocide, and the war against Iran.

According to a report in the *Detroit Free Press*, “By some estimates, it could take five years or more to replenish the munitions that have been used in the last 40 days” of the war against Iran. It quoted John Ferrari, a retired Army major general who now works for the American Enterprise Institute, a right wing Washington, DC think tank, who warned, “We are on borrowed time. The Russians, the Chinese, the Iranians—everybody knows that we don’t have enough munitions.”

For their part, auto executives, with profits lagging as a result of low electric vehicle sales, are eyeing Trump’s proposed \$1.5 trillion military budget.

A defense official stated, “The Department of War is committed to rapidly expanding the defense industrial base by leveraging all available commercial solutions and technologies to ensure our warfighters maintain a decisive advantage.”

The meeting with top auto executives follows the announcement earlier this year of the launch of the so-called “Arsenal of Freedom” project, aimed at putting US industry—and all of society—on a war footing. This has involved tours by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and other military officials of weapons plants.

Hegseth is calling for the rebuilding of the US military-industrial base and moving away from what he calls a

“peacetime science fair” toward a “wartime arms race,” aiming to “out-innovate competitors.”

The enlistment of the auto industry into the US war drive recalls the role that carmakers played during World War II, when all domestic auto production was suspended and plants were repurposed for military production, turning Detroit into what was branded by the Roosevelt administration as the “Arsenal of Democracy.”

In reality, American capitalism was fighting not for “democracy” but for world hegemony. Critical components of the “home front” included the internment of Japanese-Americans, the jailing of anti-war socialists and a de facto ban on strikes. This last part was imposed by the trade union bureaucracy, who exchanged a “no strike pledge” for automatic dues check-offs and other measures aimed at shoring up the position of the apparatus.

In June 1941, on the eve of US entry into the war, the Roosevelt administration crushed a strike by 12,000 North American Aviation workers in Inglewood, California. US troops occupied the plant, the local union charter was revoked, and workers were threatened with being drafted into the military if they resisted.

However, what is taking place today would be better termed the “Arsenal of Genocide.” Trump’s threats to annihilate Iranian civilization are only the latest sign of an American ruling elite resorting to open criminality in a desperate bid to shore up its world position.

While not included in the recent talks with automakers, the United Auto Workers leadership has offered its services for the role of wartime enforcer of “labor discipline” on behalf of US imperialism. While occasionally verbally distancing itself from the Gaza genocide, the UAW has embraced the imperialist war drive against the global rivals of US capitalism, primarily China and Russia.

In response to the moves by the Trump administration to enlist the auto companies in the drive to war, Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, who is running for UAW president,

said:

This is what fueled the student protests against the genocide in Gaza. Universities were associated with war development and war technologies, and students and university workers did not want any part of it.

War is being presented to workers as something that will bring jobs, but the reality is that workers will pay in blood.

They are gearing up to send workers and the children of workers to fight these wars, to die for the profits of those who are exploiting workers. The wars in the Middle East have led to debacles. They have left scars on the working class that will not soon be forgotten.

Trump talks about destroying an entire civilization, but it is not just Trump talking—it is US imperialism that is driving this.

The only way we are going to stop that is through our collective action. The UAW bureaucracy is fine with workers going off to fight wars as long as they collect dues. They are not going to be fighting these wars.

The UAW usually lines up behind the Democrats, but they are fully backing the Trump administration by promoting war production. Fain wears a shirt with a bomber on it. Anti-genocide protesters in Michigan were thrown out of a UAW rally.

This is part of the bureaucracy's policy that everything must be subordinated to nationalism and the war effort. Nationalism is a poison being fed to the working class, and workers must oppose this.

Workers face a choice. It is not all said and done—we still have an opportunity to stop it. The power of the working class is real. Workers need to understand their class strength and act. But the UAW bureaucracy is not going to lead that fight. If they remain in charge, we are going to lose.

This means workers need to assert their own power by building rank-and-file committees to organize and coordinate struggles based on the interests of workers, not the UAW bureaucracy.

Fain and the UAW apparatus have given vital political support to the Trump administration by embracing Trump's global tariff war. Through these actions, Fain and the bureaucracy seek to divide the working class along national lines, scapegoating foreign workers and tying workers to the war program of the US ruling class.

UAW President Shawn Fain has often spoken nostalgically of the “Arsenal of Democracy” and has promoted converting auto plants for defense industry use. In 2024, then-president Joe Biden, for whom Fain was a top ally, described the unions as his “domestic NATO.”

Last month, the UAW bureaucracy shut down a strike after 5 days by General Dynamics shipbuilders at Bath Iron Works in Maine. Workers at the facility make the same guided missile destroyers being deployed against Iran.

In a visit to the facility only weeks before the strike, Hegseth delivered a speech in which he stated, “[America and Americans first] means we protect your jobs, your security, and your family's future before we even think about any foreign country or globalist peacekeeping project. We invest in factories in Colorado, not China.” The local UAW leadership reportedly responded by leading chants of “USA, USA.”

The UAW has shut down other defense strikes, including Eaton Aerospace workers in Jackson, Michigan, and GE Aerospace workers outside Cincinnati.

A worker at parts supplier American Axle & Manufacturing in Three Rivers, Michigan, where workers are in the midst of an ongoing contract struggle, told the WSWS in response to the meetings:

“This was just the start of something larger, and that something larger is now emerging. Trump said he is ready to go to war and that Iran will cease to exist. Fain, as well as the leadership beneath him, are all pawns in this.

“We are repeating history. Detroit was the epicenter of the war effort in 1940—it was the base for mass production of military equipment. The auto industry supplied weapons, equipment, planes and vehicles.

“I knew they might try to weaponize one of the largest manufacturing industries—the auto industry. And since AAM is global, for all we know, those plants overseas could already be producing for them.

“This is why we are building warehouses [instead of production facilities]. AAM is required to maintain a 30-day bank of parts for GM, and if production shifts to military supply, they will need that buffer to avoid disruption.”



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