

The class divide between US auto workers and the UAW

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Late last month, in an incident that revealed the irreconcilable conflict between the working class and the trade union apparatus, hundreds of workers clashed with officials of the United Auto Workers (UAW) at a meeting in the Bay Area, California town of Fremont.

The episode, which was captured on video by rank-and-file union members (See YouTube video), was an expression of the class antagonism between the workers and the UAW, which functions as an industrial policeman for the corporations and the government.

Anger boiled over against UAW Local 2244 officials who have done nothing to stop the closure of the New United Motor Manufacturing (NUMMI) plant, or even secure an adequate severance package for the 4,500 workers who will lose their jobs when the factory ceases production on March 31.

The fate of the factory—the last remaining auto assembly plant in California—was sealed last June, when General Motors liquidated its share in the joint GM-Toyota operation as part of the forced bankruptcy and restructuring of GM at the hands of the Obama administration.

While giving the US auto company a free ride, the UAW launched a chauvinist campaign against Toyota, including a petition drive calling for a boycott of the company and protests in front of the Japanese embassy in Washington urging the White House to launch trade war measures against Asian automakers.

This reactionary campaign has won little support among NUMMI workers, some of whom have charged that the UAW is not pressing GM for severance payments because the union has a 17.5 percent ownership stake in the company. While doing nothing to stop the plant closing, the nationalist campaign appears aimed at extorting a \$72 million payment from Toyota to a union-controlled retiree health care investment fund.

The anger of workers against the UAW exploded at a January 24 meeting of the Fremont local attended by some 400 union members. The eruption began during comments by UAW Local 2244 Bargaining Chairman Javier Contreras, who was booed and jeered as he attempted to present details of the severance deal. Contreras did not try to conceal his contempt for the workers, declaring that no matter how many spoke out at the meeting, “at the end of the day, on April 1, everybody in this room will not have a job, no matter what you say.”

When an older worker demanded to know “where the hell” the union officials had been for the last six months, Contreras shouted, “Shut the f— up, you motherf—!” At that point, furious workers rushed to the front of the room and chairs began to fly. Contreras and other UAW personnel gathered around the podium to defend themselves against the workers, while other officials pleaded for calm and called in the police.

The event was the latest sign of growing anger and militancy in the working class that foreshadows a renewal of the class struggle, as workers resist the drive to make them pay for the crisis of American capitalism and the multitrillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street. Late last year, Ford workers overwhelmingly rejected a concessions contract pushed by the UAW. In towns and cities across the country, hundreds are turning out at public meetings to protest the closure of schools and cuts in basic social services.

The clash at the Fremont meeting revealed fundamental class divisions. Behind the podium were the bureaucrats-turned-executives of the UAW, the corrupt and well-paid junior partners of the auto companies and the ruling elite. On the other side were auto workers whose opposition to the attack on their jobs and living standards expresses the common interests of the entire working class.

After decades of betrayals, culminating in the complicity of the UAW in mass layoffs, plant closures and the gutting of wages and benefits at GM and Chrysler, workers rightfully look upon this organization as alien and hostile to their interests.

The critical question, however, is what political conclusions are to be drawn and what perspective must the working class adopt to assert its interests.

The degeneration of the UAW and its transformation into an adjunct of the corporations and the government are rooted in the union's defense of the capitalist profit system and its promotion of nationalism. The alternative for auto workers and the American working class as a whole is to unite workers in the US and internationally in the struggle for socialism.

The profit system has failed, and so have all "labor" organizations that subordinate the working class to that system and the modern-day plutocrats who preside over it.

The so-called unions are auxiliary agencies for the exploitation and impoverishment of the workers, not their defense. They cannot be reformed.

The precondition of any serious struggle by auto workers is a break with the UAW and the building of new organizations of the rank-and-file, independent of the official trade unions, to mobilize mass resistance to plant closings, wage and benefit cuts and the assault on social programs.

This must be guided by a new political strategy. The working class must reject the unions' alliance with the Democratic Party, which is no less a political tool of the financial aristocracy than the Republican Party, as the Obama administration has so clearly demonstrated.

Jobs, wages, pensions and health care can be defended only on the basis of an independent political struggle of the working class for a socialist program to smash the grip of the financial elite. The banks and major corporations must be nationalized and transformed into public institutions, democratically controlled and run for the benefit of working people and society as a whole, rather than private profit.

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