

Behind the UAW-IG Metall transnational partnership

By Shannon Jones
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Recently the United Auto Workers in the US and the German IG Metall federation, amidst considerable fanfare, launched the so-called Transnational Partnership Initiative aimed at closer cooperation between both organizations.

In a press statement marking the formation of the alliance, the UAW declared, “One goal of the TPI: Collaborate to improve wages and working conditions for employees at German-owned auto manufacturers and suppliers in the US South. Another goal: Expand the principle of ‘co-determination’ between management and employees by establishing German-style workers councils or similar bodies to promote employee representation.”

Far from improving wages and working conditions, under the name of “codetermination,” the aim of the initiative is to even further integrate the UAW into the structure of corporate management and the state in order to suppress the strivings of workers.

The announcement of the formation of the TPI came ahead of the scheduled vote by skilled trades workers at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee on the recognition of the UAW as their bargaining agent. With the support of IG Metal, the UAW is seeking to get a foothold in the factory following the combined vote by skilled trades and production workers at the facility last year against representation by the UAW.

While for its own tactical reasons Volkswagen is opposing the second vote by skilled trades workers, it in general backs the drive to impose the UAW on workers at the plant. The company wants to establish a works council at the facility based on the German model. Under US labor law, such a council would be illegal without the participation of a union.

The UAW-IG Metall partnership has nothing to do with unifying German and American workers to fight

the global auto corporations. Rather, it is an alliance of two corrupt bureaucratic apparatuses for the purpose of straitjacketing and suppressing the working class.

The works council model, which the UAW and VW are seeking to impose on workers in Chattanooga, has been for decades used to strangle, in a web of union-management collaboration, the struggle by German workers to defend their jobs, wages and living standards.

In Germany, works councils have been instrumental in assisting the drive by Volkswagen to impose the costs of the scandal involving the company’s rigging of emission test results on the backs of VW workers. As is now acknowledged, the company engaged in wide-scale fraud over a period of years affecting at least 130 models. The sheer scale of the deception points to the involvement of numerous accomplices in upper level management with the knowledge of IG Metall officials.

The scandal is being used to implement a long-planned restructuring of VW worldwide at the expense of the company’s 600,000 workers. The works council and IG Metall are playing a key role in the planned restructuring of VW. Works councilors and union officials are acting as cheerleaders for corporate management, which is implicated in the criminal manipulation of test results. They have pledged their full collaboration in working out a plan for massive cuts to be imposed on VW employees.

Already last year, IG Metal and the VW works council presented the board of directors with a 400-page proposal to save 5 billion euros. IG Metall and the works council at VW’s MAN SE truck division in Munich have been instrumental in forcing through 1,800 job cuts, with more job losses on the way.

IG Metall and the works council at GM-Opel played

a key role in the closing of the plant in Bochum, Germany in December 2014, the first auto factory to be closed in Germany since World War II. When in 2012 GM demanded the closure of one of its factory locations in Germany, IG Metall recommended the Bochum plant, where workers had defied the union on multiple occasions by carrying out strikes.

When Bochum workers refused to vote for the closure of their own factory, IG Metall punished them by bringing forward the date of the closure by two years. When angry workers threatened to quit the union, IG Metall retaliated by excluding non-members from a “social plan” transferring laid-off workers to other facilities.

Works council positions have been extremely lucrative for IG Metal officials, with a number of them transitioning to high-paying management positions. Works council functionaries often advance from advisors to the VW executive board to full-fledged managers, with corresponding million-euro salaries.

Such a prospect is clearly attractive to the UAW. Works councils offer the potential for a whole new source of patronage and income for the UAW apparatus, which has over the past decades continuously sought to demonstrate its usefulness to management as an anti-labor police force in the factories.

The problem that the UAW faces is that VW workers want nothing to do with this discredited and reactionary organization. While the UAW has blamed the intervention of right-wing Republican politicians for its defeat last year at the Chattanooga factory, the reality is that workers rightfully have no confidence in an organization that is being promoted by management. Indeed, as part of its campaign for recognition at VW, the UAW signed a “neutrality agreement” pledging the union to help maintain the company’s cost advantage relative to its North American competitors.

Many workers at the Chattanooga factory had migrated to Tennessee from Michigan, Ohio and Indiana, where they had a chance to observe firsthand the anti-worker character of the UAW. Any residual doubts are being laid to rest by the outcome of the contract negotiations with the Detroit-based car companies. Under conditions where the auto companies are boasting record sales and profits, the UAW accepted contracts that fail to even raise workers’ pay

and benefits at the level of inflation. The deals have evoked celebrations in corporate boardrooms, where the auto bosses are toasting their “partners” in the UAW leadership for keeping profits high and wages low.

The TPI will not advance the interests of autoworkers, German or American, one inch. There is an urgent need for the unification of the working class on a global basis. This cannot be carried out by reactionary bureaucratic organizations wedded to the interests of corporate management and the capitalist nation-state.

What is needed are building of new rank-and-file based organizations aimed at forging an alliance of workers in the US, Canada, Mexico, Germany, China and worldwide against the transnational auto corporations. These organizations must be independent of corporate management and democratically controlled by workers.

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