

UAW, Democrats seek to block struggle by workers against GM plant shutdowns

By Marcus Day
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A little more than a month after General Motors' announcement that it plans to idle five plants in the US and Canada and lay off nearly 15,000 hourly and salaried workers by early 2019, the United Auto Workers union and the Democratic Party are increasing their efforts to promote nationalism and block a unified struggle by autoworkers against the global auto giant.

On Wednesday, the *Detroit News* published an op-ed by UAW President Gary Jones titled "GM should fight for workers, not profits." Both the UAW and Canadian union Unifor have sought to whip up anti-Mexican and anti-Chinese sentiment in order divert anger away from the auto corporations that have attacked the jobs and conditions of workers around the world.

Noting the "thick sense of resentment" and "feeling of unfairness" in cities like the Detroit suburb of Hamtramck and Lordstown, Ohio where plants are targeted for closure, Jones attempts to portray the UAW as a defender of workers engaged in a serious fight against the shutdowns. As proof he cites the union's impotent "formal objection" to the company's plans.

In his editorial piece Jones deliberately omits the threatened closure of GM's Oshawa Assembly plant in Canada, referring only to the "four American auto plants" to be idled, and later complains of the company's imports from Canada.

Hoping workers will have somehow forgotten the role of the UAW in facilitating decades of wage cuts and layoffs, Jones writes that during the 2009 bailout of the auto industry, "employees made concessions they could ill afford — all to keep GM going." Jones goes on to criticize the "already profitable" GM for allegedly shifting production to "their Mexican plants for even larger profits."

In reality, for years the UAW has been the most faithful defender of the "right" of the auto companies to exploit workers for profit and to shut down plants as they see fit. Since the 1980s, it has promoted the reactionary outlook of corporatism, which claims that workers and the corporations have identical rather than conflicting interests. In the name of making US corporations more profitable and competitive against their foreign rivals, the UAW suppressed strikes, imposed the dictates of corporate management, and colluded in the elimination of 600,000 hourly jobs at the Big Three

automakers—GM, Ford and Chrysler.

Jones appeals not only to the Democratic Party, but also to the fascistic Trump administration, whose trade war policies and "America First" nationalism dovetail with the UAW's own reactionary perspective. He calls for measures to encourage companies to invest in the US, writing, "We call upon our elected leaders to join with us and understand that relying on corporations to do the right thing does not work. We need tax and trade laws that reward US investment and hold companies accountable."

Jones' article follows a video statement by former Vice President Joe Biden issued by the UAW last week. Biden, a contender for the 2020 Democratic Party presidential nomination, feigns outrage at GM's planned layoffs and factory closures under conditions in which the company is earning significant profits and carrying out billions in stock buybacks. In doing so, he seeks to divert attention from his own role, and that of the Obama administration as whole, in carrying out an historic restructuring of the auto industry in 2009 at the expense of workers, including the expansion of the tier system, the halving of wages of new hires and the wiping out of tens of thousands of jobs.

Defending the supposed right of GM to carry out cuts in response to market trends, Biden attempts to shift the blame instead onto the backs of workers in Mexico and China. "Look, I know GM's corporate leaders have said they have to make tough decisions in order to deal with changing consumer sentiment, and that's true, it's accurate," Biden says. "But why are they making new investments in China, in Mexico?"

Biden says autoworkers made the biggest sacrifices during the bailout. He then says even deeper cuts will now be required but that shareholders should suffer a little too. "Folks, it's time for everybody to be in on the deal. Everybody take a little bit of the hit, and everybody will do well."

An article in the *Toledo Blade* on December 23 points to some of the "pain" that has been inflicted on tens of thousands of workers by Biden and the Obama administration in collaboration with the UAW.

The article notes the vulnerable position of workers facing the possibility of having their plants closed because of the elimination of the Jobs Bank. The Jobs Bank previously

provided laid-off workers with 95 percent of their pay and guaranteed that they would not be forced to accept transfers to plants more than 100 miles away. These protections were given up by the UAW at the request of Obama's "car czar" Steve Rattner in the course of the auto bailouts.

The narrative that both Gary Jones and Biden promote—that American jobs can be defended by appealing to the auto companies to attack the jobs of workers in other countries—can lead only to catastrophe. In fact, the fate of workers in the US is completely bound up with that of workers around the world, who are facing an assault by the same companies. GM and Ford are both planning mass layoffs overseas, as are a number of foreign automakers.

A December 25 article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled, "China's Car Slump Leaves Foreign Auto Makers With Idle Factories," pointed to the accelerating decline in sales in China, which have led to the destruction of thousands of jobs. The global auto corporations had bet heavily on the continued expansion of the world's largest car market. The slowdown of profits in China means the global automakers will double down their attacks on workers in North America, Europe and Latin America.

The UAW, along with the rest of the trade union apparatus, has long served as a key prop of the Democratic Party, which is one of the two parties of Wall Street and big business. In the midst of a sharp growth in the class struggle and the expectation of an immense struggle over the contracts at the Big Three auto companies in 2019, the Democrats and the UAW are doing everything they can to divide workers in the US from their brothers and sisters in other countries, in order to beat back opposition and create the conditions to enact even worse concessions.

In opposition to the nationalism promoted by Biden and Jones, Jude, a janitorial contract worker at a GM facility in Michigan, told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, "We absolutely have to unify to take on GM. In the 1960s, there were hundreds of thousands of GM workers and it's been dwindling for decades."

"If we are to fight GM, we are going to have to take them on around the world, in Canada, Mexico, China and everywhere. Everyone who works for GM has got to unite to handle GM," she said.

"We're not going to get any support from the politicians in Washington," she continued. "It doesn't matter if they are Democrats or Republican, they are for the money, not the workers. We have to stand up for ourselves. People want to fight not just for themselves but for the next generation."

The unions' and Democrats' campaign to head off a united struggle of autoworkers comes as the auto companies continue to disclose plans for further attacks on workers' jobs. Last week, GM announced plans to lay off 50 hourly and salaried employees in February at its Brownstown, Michigan, battery plant, which produces lithium-ion batteries for the company's

electric and hybrid vehicles.

"There are communities that depend on these factories and jobs," Jude said. Pointing to the threats facing workers at auto parts plants, salaried workers, and beyond, she added, "There are thousands of workers in the supplier plants who will be out of work. Where I work, GM is contracting out janitorial worker and even salaried positions like engineers and designers. Just before Thanksgiving they got rid of dozens of high seniority engineers who had 30 or 40 years here. If they didn't accept the buyout, they were kicked out anyway."

"It's going to be a sad New Year for a lot more white-collar workers. After the first of the year security is going to go around, tap them on the shoulder and say, 'This is your day to go, buddy.'"

"Nobody is going to have stability any more. It doesn't matter if you're a line worker, an electrician or a designer. The restructuring of GM by Obama set up these two categories—'legacy' workers and 'new GM workers.' They want to get rid of all the older, higher paid workers and the young blood will be temporary and casual workers doing the jobs of two or three workers combined."

Sentiment is growing throughout the auto industry for a united struggle, including strike action. The attempts by Jones, Biden, Trump and others to block such a fight and prevent any challenge arising to the capitalist system further demonstrates the importance of the meeting held by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party on December 9. The meeting unanimously resolved to form rank-and-file committees throughout the auto industry, independent of the UAW and Unifor, in order to organize a counter-offensive by workers for their interests. We encourage all workers interested in joining this initiative to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>