

UAW bargaining convention sets course for new round of givebacks

By Jerry White
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Hundreds of union functionaries are assembling in Detroit this week for the three-day United Auto Workers (UAW) Special Convention on Collective Bargaining, which concludes today. The convention takes place as the four-year labor agreements covering 150,000 General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers are set to expire six months from now, on September 14.

For decades, up until the 1980s, the UAW bargaining convention would attract the attention of thousands of autoworkers and would often be the scene of protests by rank-and-file workers demanding contract improvements as well as substantive debates on the convention floor. Today, hardly any workers pay attention to the stage-managed and bureaucratic affair, which excludes the real concerns of autoworkers. If they find any reflection it is in the form of fearful comments from UAW bureaucrats about a rebellion from below.

In the last round of contracts, in 2015, rank-and-file workers at Fiat Chrysler (FCA) voted against the tentative contract, the first defeat of a UAW-backed national contract in three decades. The UAW was able to ram through the deals at FCA, GM and Ford only through a campaign of intimidation, lies and vote fraud. The agreements included labor cost increases below the rate of inflation, established an eight-year “progression” for lower-paid workers to achieve top pay, and gave the company a green light to replace older, higher-paid workers with temporary part-time workers, who pay UAW dues but are essentially disposable laborers to be hired and fired at will.

The grip of the UAW has been further weakened by a federal corruption probe and revelations that Fiat Chrysler executives paid millions of dollars in bribes to the UAW to sign pro-company agreements over the last decade. As contract negotiations begin, autoworkers are wondering how much the auto bosses are paying UAW negotiators this time.

With the auto companies enjoying a decade-long string of record profits since the UAW colluded with the Obama administration’s 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler, autoworkers are determined to abolish the hated

two-tier wage system, substantially increase their wages and reverse decades of UAW-backed concessions.

This determination is part of a growing mood of militancy and increased strike activity by workers throughout the US and internationally, which began in 2018 and has continued this year. This eruption of class struggle—which includes the revolt of maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico, a continuing wave of teachers’ strikes in the US, the “yellow vest” protests in France and, most recently, the mass strikes and protests in Algeria—has increasingly taken the form of a rebellion against the corrupt, right-wing unions.

In his opening remarks Monday, UAW President Gary Jones tried to maintain the charade that the UAW was actually fighting for the workers. “We are one,” he said, and “collective bargaining is a democratic process that requires participation from every single one of us ... What are we doing here? We’re setting the bargaining agenda for the next four years, we are setting a bar, and we are setting it high.”

In fact, rank-and-file workers have absolutely no say in the direction of the UAW, which functions as a labor police force for the employers. And far from “setting a high bar,” the concessions imposed by the UAW have set the precedent for the lowering of the living standards of workers across America and around the world.

“Even when we face setbacks, we know that we are one,” Jones pontificated. “We want management to understand solidarity, when you take from one of us, you take from all of us.”

This too is a lie. Over the last four decades, the UAW has overseen the destruction of 600,000 GM, Ford and Chrysler jobs and a historic decline in the social position of autoworkers, once the highest paid industrial workers in America. The UAW executives, however, have not suffered along with the workers they falsely claim to represent.

On the contrary, the UAW is a thriving business, controlling billions in assets and led by officials like Jones who live in a different world than that inhabited by rank-and-file workers. They are in the top 2 and 3 percent of

income earners and, as the federal corruption indictments have shown, use workers' dues money for golf outings in Palm Springs and the purchase of \$10,000 designer shoes for their wives and girlfriends. In exchange for agreeing to the halving of wages for second-tier workers during the 2009 auto industry bailout, the Obama administration handed the UAW control of a multibillion-dollar retiree health care trust and tens of millions of GM shares.

In his speech, Jones announced that the UAW International Executive Board (IEB) had approved a raise in strike pay from \$200 to \$250 per week, effective immediately, and a raise to \$275 per week starting next January. "This is an important signal to all our members that the IEB has their backs," he declared.

This is a cynical and empty gesture. A year before the 2015 contract talks, the UAW increased dues by 25 percent allegedly to build up the Strike Insurance Fund in preparation for an all-out battle with the car companies. Leaving aside the two-day strike at selected GM factories in 2007 and a six-hour strike at some Chrysler plants, which paved the way for the introduction of the two-tier wage and benefit system, the UAW has not called a national auto strike since the Ford walkout in 1976.

According to its US Labor Department filing, the UAW spent \$2.7 million in strike benefits in 2016, or one percent of its total disbursements of \$272 million. This supposed strike war chest has long been a massive slush fund for union bureaucrats. The UAW constitution was amended in 1980, 1989, 1995 and 2002 "in order to create additional sources of revenue for the international union," according to Thomas Adams, a history professor at Michigan State University and a former UAW member, who retired after 30 years at GM's Buick City complex in Flint, Michigan.

Far from preparing for a serious fight, the main preoccupation of the UAW bureaucrats is figuring out how they can beat back the aspirations of autoworkers in the upcoming contracts.

On the eve of the convention, the *Detroit News* wrote, "GM, Ford and FCA have all posted hefty profits in the four years since the last UAW contract was signed, and the union's members will likely want a bigger piece of that success. But as the industry's extended period of growth finally begins to slow and automakers pivot toward expensive electrification, mobility and autonomy efforts, the companies and the union may need to reconcile with preemptive belt-tightening."

In his remarks, Jones did not bother to mention GM's shutdown of the Lordstown, Ohio plant last week, or the slated closure of plants in Detroit, Baltimore and Oshawa, Ontario. Whatever verbal complaints the UAW has issued over the GM plant closings, the reality is that the union

executives welcome this threat to workers' jobs as a means of softening them up for even deeper concessions. As it has for the last four decades, the UAW will make "saving jobs" the excuse for abandoning workers' demands for improved wages and conditions.

This was made clear in the comments of Kristin Dzikczek, vice president of the company-aligned Center for Automotive Research, who told the *News*, "These are still really good times, and these are still profitable companies, so by bringing job security up on the list, wage expectations might temper."

The UAW and the auto companies want to accelerate their plans to convert the workforce into largely low-wage, casual workers, in order to "in-source" more work. This requires a concerted effort to purge the older, higher-paid workers from the plants. The UAW could also push to expand its franchise by taking over the provision of health care benefits for current workers in addition to retirees. This was dropped in 2015 after confronting universal opposition from the workers, who had seen the UAW cut retiree benefits.

Workers know that the UAW is preparing another sellout, and discussions have already started in the plants on how to fight it. Opposition to the UAW has taken the form of growing support for the call by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* for the establishment of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to mobilize workers to fight for the demands they need, not what the auto companies and the UAW claim is affordable.

This was reflected in the support for the February 9 demonstration at GM's headquarters in Detroit organized by the *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Steering Committee of Rank-and-File Committees to oppose GM plans to close five plants in the US and Canada and eliminate 14,000 jobs.

During the 2015 contract fight, the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* was the voice of rank-and-file autoworkers and the center of opposition, prompting the UAW to brand the newsletter as a purveyor of "fake news," even as its officials were taking millions in bribes from the auto companies. Opposition has only grown over the last four years, and autoworkers are joining the rising tide of class struggle. To take this forward, workers will need new organizations of struggle and a new political perspective and strategy to defend their social rights and fight the capitalist system.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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