

Former UAW President Owen Bieber dead at 90

By Jerry White
27 February 2020

Owen Bieber, who was president of the United Auto Workers union from 1983 to 1995, died at the age of 90 on February 17.

Bieber's death evoked statements of sorrow and praise from executives at General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler. "Bieber will be remembered for his commitment to workers and his leadership of the UAW through challenging times for more than a decade," GM officials said. Ford Chief Executive Bill Ford said Bieber's "leadership has had a lasting impact."

Among autoworkers, however, his passage has gone almost unnoticed. Bieber, a longtime union functionary, is virtually unknown among autoworkers and workers in general. He is despised by the vast majority of an older generation who remember him at all.

This in itself is a measure of the sclerotic character of the unions and the chasm that exists between the workers and the business executives who run them. When the unions had the active allegiance of millions of workers, figures such as mineworkers' leader John L. Lewis and even the UAW's Walter Reuther commanded the attention of workers, despite their conservative politics and treacherous dealings with the corporate elite.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Bieber presided over the final demise of the UAW as an organization that conducted a limited defense of the day-to-day interests of autoworkers and its transformation into what it is today: a direct arm of corporate management.

Born in 1929, Bieber was the first UAW president who had no connection to the struggles of the 1930s that established the UAW as a mass industrial union. Hired into a Grand Rapids, Michigan auto parts plant in 1948, he rose in the ranks of the local union, which his father had co-founded, and served as local president between 1956 and 1962.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the UAW bureaucracy headed by Reuther consolidated its hold over the UAW by purging the socialists and left-wing militants who had led the 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike and the other pioneering struggles. Although there was significant support for the building of a labor party within the ranks of the UAW and other unions, Reuther insisted on the political subordination of the working class to the capitalist Democratic Party, declaring at the 1954 convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) that America did not have a "rigid class structure" like Europe.

In 1962, Bieber was hired to work full-time for the union's international staff in UAW Region 1D, the largest in the country. He would direct the region from 1972 to 1980, cutting his teeth by beating back the opposition of GM workers in Flint who were still inspired by the sit-down strike.

The 1970s was a decade of powerful social struggles in the US and around the world. The decade saw 2,888 major strikes in the US involving over 13 million workers. This resistance, which included struggles by young autoworkers radicalized by the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements, frustrated the initial efforts of the ruling class to force workers to pay for the crisis of American capitalism and the decline in the world position of US industry.

By the end of the decade, however, the ruling class had shifted from a

policy of relative class compromise to all-out class war. The opening shot was the Carter administration's 1979 appointment of former Chase Manhattan Bank vice president Paul Volcker as Federal Reserve chairman. Volcker raised interest rates to record levels, precipitating the worst economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. He did this in order to use plant closures and mass unemployment to batter down the resistance of workers and eliminate unprofitable sections of industry unable to compete with more efficient Japanese and European rivals.

In 1980, a year after Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in the UK, Ronald Reagan was elected US president, initiating a decade of violent union-busting, which began with Reagan's firing of 13,000 striking PATCO air traffic controllers in August of 1981.

Committed to the defense of capitalist private property and the national interests of American imperialism, the UAW and the other unions abandoned any resistance and openly collaborated with the corporations to lower labor costs in order to make US-based corporations more competitive against their foreign rivals.

Bieber's predecessor, Douglas Fraser, was brought onto the board of directors of Chrysler Corporation as the company headed toward bankruptcy in 1979. Fraser collaborated in a campaign of economic terror against workers, which included the shutdown of the Dodge Main plant in Detroit and the elimination of 57,000 jobs, including 20,000 in Detroit alone. At the same time, Fraser agreed to the first wage and benefit concessions in the history of the UAW—the equivalent of \$15,000 in today's dollars from each worker—in the name of "saving" the remaining jobs.

In an effort to divert anger away from the companies and the union, the UAW launched a "Buy American" campaign, which was based on anti-Japanese racism. This led to the 1982 murder of Chinese-American engineer Vincent Chin by a Chrysler foreman and his laid-off son.

At the same time, the UAW did nothing to oppose the layoff of 400,000 workers during the 1981-82 recession. In fact, the UAW bureaucrats saw the jobs massacre as a means of purging the union of younger, more militant workers so it could extend concessions to GM and Ford and further integrate the UAW into the structure of corporate management.

Bieber was chosen by Fraser to head the UAW-GM department in 1980. He collaborated with GM to ram through the first-ever concessions contract with the largest US automaker. While publicly opposing GM's demands to re-open the contract, behind the scenes Bieber and Fraser were negotiating a concessions package.

In April 1982, Bieber pushed through a contract that dropped the annual 3 percent wage increase, eliminated nine paid holidays, deferred cost-of-living adjustments and established a wage tier that paid new employees 20 percent less. Bieber was forced to drop a plan to re-write local work rules, however, as GM workers rebelled amid a renewed wave of militancy, including a six-week strike by 9,600 UAW members at Chrysler in Canada, who refused to accept the UAW concessions pattern, and the 205-day strike by 23,000 Caterpillar workers in Illinois and other

states.

Fraser hand-picked Bieber to succeed him as UAW president at the union's constitutional convention held in Dallas, Texas in May 1983. Attempting to answer charges of sellout, Bieber declared, "We have made sacrifices not because we lacked the guts to take the companies on, but because we have the wisdom to know we were better off to protect much of what we had to fight another day from a position of strength."

While saying nothing about Reagan's imprisonment of leaders of the air traffic controllers union, which was occurring only a few miles away, Bieber reiterated his support for Fraser's corporatist program of labor-management "partnership" and pledged his support to elect a Democratic president in 1984.

Corporatism

Commenting on the convention, the *Bulletin*, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, wrote: "[T]he 27th Constitutional Convention was historic in one respect: it marked the official acceptance of the most right-wing program ever adopted by a major trade union. The essence of this can be summed up in one word: Corporatism, that is, a conception of unrestrained class collaboration that preaches the complete harmony of interests between the capitalists and the working class. This corporatist program was put forward in a document entitled 'Blueprint for a Working America,' unveiled by Fraser and his successor Owen Bieber. ..."

The plan, which called for the establishment of a tri-partite structure consisting of labor, business and federal and state government to draw up and direct a "national industrial policy," was virtually identical to the program of Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, the *Bulletin* explained. This plan to suppress any opposition from workers was palmed off as "industrial democracy" by the leaders of the UAW, including many who were members of the Democratic Socialists of America, then led by Michael Harrington.

A year later, commenting on the 1984 UAW-GM contract, which included the setting up of a network of corporatist labor-management bodies, including joint training centers, the *Bulletin* wrote, "If ratified, this contract will severely damage the union as an organization of workers independent of corporate management and go a long way towards transforming the UAW into a company union."

The decline of America's "Big Three"

This flowed directly from the nationalist and pro-capitalist orientation of the UAW. The origins of the union were bound up with the explosive growth of the US-based auto industry in the 1930s and 1940s and the dominant position of the Big Three automakers, which produced 80 percent of the world's cars after World War II and virtually all of the cars sold in the US.

By the 1970s and 1980s, however, the predominant position of the US carmakers had been severely eroded by the rise of more efficient Asian and European competitors. The "Big Three" US companies were rapidly losing market share not only abroad, but also within the US itself.

In addition, advances in telecommunications, computers, transportation and other technologies enabled the corporations to distribute the production of a single car—including auto components and final assembly operations—across several continents in search of the cheapest sources of labor.

Bieber, and the unions in general, had only one answer to the development of transnational corporations and production on a global scale for world markets, which created a global market for labor power. Their answer was to induce the corporations to keep production at home in order to maintain the unions' dues base and influence, by offering to impose ever greater concessions on the workers, i.e., to collaborate in cutting wages and increasing exploitation.

Bieber oversaw one concessions contract after another in which the

UAW exchanged the wages and benefits of workers for a share in the spoils from their exploitation. Each contract was palmed off as a way to "save American jobs." But under Bieber's watch, the number of active UAW members fell from 1.2 million in the early 1980s to 800,000 by the mid-1990s. The number of UAW members working at GM, Ford and Chrysler fell from 537,000 to less than 400,000.

The UAW and AFL-CIO worked systematically to suppress the class struggle. The average number of strikes per year fell from 288 in the 1970s to 83 in the 1980s and 35 in the 1990s. Bieber betrayed a series of strikes against union-busting in the auto parts industry in the 1980s and capitulated to the strikebreaking threats of Caterpillar, imposing an ignominious defeat on the five-month strike by 12,600 workers in 1992.

This went hand in hand with working to divide autoworkers along national lines by means of chauvinism and racism. This was the exact opposite of a program that really defended the interests of autoworkers—one that fought for the international unification of the struggles of autoworkers against the giant transnational companies that exploited them.

With opposition to concessions growing in the UAW, Bieber and Bob White, the leader of the Canadian section of the UAW, engineered a split in the organization in 1985 so as to pursue their own separate nationalist programs, to the detriment of workers on both sides of the border.

During Bieber's time, there were several dissident factions in the UAW, including the New Directions Movement, which won support by criticizing the UAW's "jointness" policies. These organizations, however, did not oppose the nationalist program of the UAW, its political support for the Democratic Party or its defense of the capitalist system. In the end, the various dissidents were incorporated into the Solidarity House leadership or proved incapable of opposing the onslaught on workers' jobs and living standards.

During this period, only the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, fought for autoworkers to rebel against the UAW bureaucracy and fight for their political independence through the building of a labor party based on socialist policies and the international unity of the working class.

The quarter century following Bieber's departure in 1995 has made clear that the collapse of the UAW was not the product of the failings or corruption of one individual or a few "bad apples," but rather the inevitable outcome of the program and political orientation on which the UAW is based.

All of Bieber's successors have continued and deepened the policies of corporatism, working to rip up whatever remained of the gains won by previous generations of autoworkers. Once the highest-paid industrial workers in the US, if not the world, today American autoworkers are increasingly a low-paid, temporary workforce, saddled with multi-tier wages and benefits, 10-12-hour workdays, and constant threats of layoff and victimization.

The exposure of rampant corruption and bribe-taking over the past two years has demonstrated the outcome of the degeneration of the UAW. Today, it is nothing more than a criminal, right-wing, anti-working class organization. It is an enemy of the workers, not a representative of their interests.

To defend jobs and living standards workers need new organizations of struggle—rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, which are independent of the UAW and the other pro-capitalist and nationalist unions. These committees will fight to abolish all tiers, transform temps into full-time workers, restore the jobs of all laid off and victimized workers and establish workers' control over line speed and safety. They will seek to establish lines of communication with workers around the world and organize cross-border struggles to defend the social rights of all workers.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* are committed to provide all possible assistance to autoworkers who want to build such rank-and-file committees.

In the face of a new restructuring of the global auto industry, driven by the struggle to dominate shrinking markets and the new electric and self-driving technologies, autoworkers around the world are being thrust into new battles. The past two years have seen a sharp growth of strikes and mass protests, often in direct conflict with the unions, in China, Eastern Europe, Mexico, India, the United States and other countries.

In order to fight the global corporations, workers need a global strategy and a socialist program. The global auto industry must be transformed into a public enterprise collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class, as part of the reorganization of the world economy based on human need, not private profit.

This requires the building of a new political leadership among autoworkers and in the working class as a whole, based on a socialist and internationalist program. Autoworkers who see the need to build such a leadership should contact the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>