

Time For Autoworkers to Fightback

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Organized labor in the U.S. is at a very serious crossroads — and with it the working class as a whole. On the one hand, union organizing is on the rise for the first time in decades, with the possibility of exploding if — and it is a big IF — the Democrats carry out their promise of passing the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). Another positive is the United Electrical Workers (UE) workers victory in Chicago, who single-handedly re-taught U.S. labor the word “militancy.”

On the other hand, however, there are very serious threats. The deepening recession is causing unemployment to skyrocket: supply on the labor market will force down already low wages everywhere.

Also, state workers in California are under attack, made to be the scapegoats for the state budget deficit — a trend that will likely spread to many other states facing similar budget crises.

The corporate media is playing a consistent anti-union drumbeat, blaming union workers for state budget deficits and the ruin of U.S. auto companies.

Now, the federal government is working in tandem with the owners of the Big Three to extort the United Auto Workers (UAW), making the \$17.4 billion bailout conditional on destroying workers’ wages and benefits.

This strategy is familiar to many union workers: a threat of a bankruptcy is used at the bargaining table like a gun to the head.

The workers are made to feel powerless since, if they want to keep their jobs, they must accept the companies’ — and now the government’s — demands.

Before, such threats were accompanied by crooked promises such as “job security” and other lies to ease the burden. Now workers must know that nothing is safe; no position is permanent; no pension secure.

In an effort to save their jobs during the last contract negotiations, autoworkers granted historic concessions. Not only did they agree to a disgraceful, permanent two-tier wage system where new employees would work for roughly one half the pay of those already employed, but they also removed the health benefits fund from GM’s balance sheet, at tremendous financial cost and risk.

Now, the UAW-controlled health benefit fund — the Voluntary Employee Benefit Association (VEBA) — is under attack, as the workers are being told that they must accept near-worthless GM stock to pay for health care, thus threatening the health care for thousands of

current and retired workers and their families.

Equally disturbing is the “restructuring plan” GM has already submitted to congress, which calls for the elimination of 31,500 jobs and the closures of two dozen factories.

In addition, as part of the bailout conditions, workers were told they must concede wages and benefits until they match the non-union autoworkers elsewhere in the United States, since after all, autoworkers wouldn't be having troubles were it not for their workers high wages, according to GM.

This lie was exposed recently when it was discovered that Toyota and other auto manufacturers had taken a nosedive in sales. Yes, Toyota had out-maneuvered the Big Three in many fields, but even they had not foreseen the drastic effects that the recession would have, causing them to lose money in the last fiscal year, the first time in its history.

As a consequence, Toyota has stalled factories, canceled plans to build new ones, reduced shifts, and laid off many of their non-union “temporary” workers.

It should be obvious to anyone willing to look that the economic crisis is, in large part, why the auto companies are on the verge of bankruptcy; bad business decisions simply hastened the impending collapse that is now about to consume the auto industry in its entirety.

Autoworkers cannot allow themselves to be made the scapegoats of a problem that is international in scope.

Indeed, the Canadian autoworkers in the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) are facing the exact problem in their country: a bailout bill (modeled after the U.S. bill) to save the auto industry, on condition that workers accept debilitating cuts in wages and benefits. An alliance between U.S. autoworkers and their Canadian counterparts would be a first commonsense step towards combating these attacks.

In response to the U.S. bailout demands, the UAW “leadership” unilaterally agreed to end the jobs bank program where workers, when laid off, receive a supplementary payment from the company that together with unemployment insurance totals an amount of money that is nearly equal to their regular hourly weekly rate of pay. The UAW officials are also about to begin implementing all the rest of the negative conditions attached to the \$17.4 billion bailout. Workers cannot wait for the bureaucrats of the UAW to lead a fight since they are “determined” to help the auto companies “restore competitiveness” — at the expense of the workers.

Nor can autoworkers rely on Democratic politicians since Barack Obama expressed his party's position by calling the bailout position “a necessary step.”

Either autoworkers begin to fight back at the rank and file level, or they will be compelled to abandon their standard of living, pensions, and their basic rights on the job since the UAW will surely be destroyed if the bailout conditions are implemented: who would continue to pay dues after so many concessions?

Autoworkers need only to look at the tactics employed by the UE workers in Chicago for inspiration. By a disciplined takeover of their factory, they forced the company to grant all their demands. A similar militant, coordinated action of the autoworkers in the U.S. and

Canada could have similar effects. Appeals for solidarity could be made across the whole continent, and autoworkers, if they win their struggle, could then offer other workers help in combating their employers and their agents in government.

The Big Three really are too big to fail, and the workers need to put themselves in a better bargaining position since granting concessions has only increased the companies' appetite for more. What better bargaining chip than taking control of the machinery?

Since the threat of bankruptcy is now an international phenomenon and is being used to destroy workers' living standards, workers everywhere would be inspired by such a bold counterattack. A victory for autoworkers would reverberate around the country and the whole world. Such an action has the potential literally to change history, as it did in the 1930s when autoworkers first started occupying factories as part of the U.S. workers' movement.

And all these struggles could be combined with the demand that the government bailout the working class, not the banks. Such a bailout would put money in the hands of working people so that they could again buy cars and other necessities, since the auto industry cannot survive otherwise.

Now is the time to start organizing!

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