

Labor (USA): State of the United Auto Workers (UAW) Union

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COMING OUT OF the economic recession of 1979-81, United Auto Workers officials convinced the union membership that it was necessary to make massive concessions to the Big Three in order keep auto plants open. They said that as the economy rebounded, the union would be able to win back what it was giving up. Never happened!

Since that time, auto workers' Cost of Living increases disappeared, skilled trade programs have been decimated, the idea of a reduced work week with no loss in pay is never discussed and multitier wages and benefits along with permanent "temporary" workers are standard in UAW contracts.

With the introduction of "jointness" programs that each of the Big Three-UAW contracts authorized, the number of union representatives who "worked" at the various training centers rose. This is now the focus of federal investigation, with six convictions so far.

On the corporate side, the biggest fish caught has been former Fiat Chrysler (FCA) Vice President Alphons Iacobelli, who was also in charge of FCA's contract negotiations. But according to Michael Brown, one of the former FCA executives in charge of running the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center, at least half a dozen executives funneled \$1.5 million worth of illegal payments to UAW officials.

Examining the 2009-2015 period, prosecutors charged the late UAW Vice President General Holiefield and his widow Monica Morgan with receiving \$435,000 in illegal payments. Other UAW officials have been indicted, revealing their luxurious lifestyle: parties where "ultra premium" liquor and wine were served and strolling models lit labor leaders' cigars; lavish meals and golf resort fees. ("Feds label Fiat Chrysler, UAW as co-conspirators," *Detroit News*, 6/13/18)

During this time the UAW had three presidents — Ron Gettelfinger, Bob King and the newly retired Dennis Williams — all members of the Administration Caucus, which has tightly controlled elections since Walter Reuther consolidated his control in the post-World War II period.

In the just concluded 2018 UAW Constitutional Convention, once again the caucus candidates were overwhelmingly elected. Gary Jones, a regional director who previously served in the UAW financial offices in Detroit (1991-2004), is now president.

President Williams' farewell address to the convention discussed the economic accomplishments of his administration, boasting that the Big Three's profit-sharing checks, fueled by SUV and truck sales, were near record levels. This, along with a balanced union budget over the last three years and the addition of nearly 15,000 additional members, is what he sees as his legacy.

In the face of an ever widening corruption scandal — as the investigation has expanded to include all three training centers — Williams has consistently maintained this is a case of a few bad apples.

Yet autoworkers, who read about Holiefield and Morgan's over-the-top Venice wedding in the Detroit

newspapers, knew that a UAW vice president's salary could not afford to pull off such a wedding and honeymoon. Or what about UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell's \$30,000 party? Even if the Administration Caucus leadership had no knowledge of what its members were doing, couldn't they have read the signs that autoworkers understood?

It is impossible to believe that the UAW leadership did not know what was going on or that its own members were involved. The recently concluded bread-and-circus convention did not have a discussion about the failure to organize the union at Volkswagen and Nissan, the failure to prevent kickbacks — or even acknowledge that the corporations expected some return on their generous "contributions."

Yet in Michael Brown's plea agreement, prosecutors wrote that "Michael Brown knew that the purpose of the conspiracy to provide prohibited payments to UAW officials was to grease the skids in order to obtain benefits, advantages and concessions in the negotiation, implementation and administration of the collective bargaining agreements between FCA and the UAW."

This is the tragedy: autoworkers working under intense conditions, a growing number of whom are permanent temporaries, have been saddled with a leadership that tells them they are lucky to have a job. Walter Reuther, who opened the door to this debacle by signing the Treaty of Detroit back in 1950, would be appalled.

That agreement, nearly seven decades ago, made a détente with the corporations: significant raises in wages and benefits in return for the company's unrelenting control over working conditions. But if Reuther was unable to break through management's determination to control production, he was willing to strike over health and safety issues and against speedup. Today the bargaining system is broken, the union's power diminished, and its leadership — having all too effectively stifled rank-initiative — cynical and corrupt.

Dianne Feeley

P.S.

* "State of the UAW". Against the Current n° 195, July-August 2018:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/195/uaw-con-con/>