

After the “No” Vote at Ford — Auto Workers Discuss the Way Forward

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In late October, in a historic show of rank-and-file opposition, Ford's 41,000 hourly workers voted down proposed contract modifications endorsed by the company and the international leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW). The modifications would have removed limits on hiring low-wage entry-level workers and frozen their wages for six years, while also limiting the right to strike. This was the first national Ford contract to be voted down by UAW members since 1976 (*Detroit Free Press*, 10/31/09).

Just one day after the final votes were counted, Ford released third quarter numbers showing nearly \$1 billion in profits, which effectively destroyed the “struggling to survive” image that the company had used to justify their demand for more cuts.

The defeated modifications were the second set of concessions Ford workers have been asked to accept in 2009 alone. In March, we gave up the cost-of-living adjustment, several bonuses, and numerous changes in work rules on the promise that these were “temporary” cuts to keep the company afloat. Many workers, fearful of rising unemployment, were willing to accept this argument.

But after years of concessions, Ford workers seem to have finally drawn a line in the sand. By organizing this historic opposition, they had to overcome pressure not only from Ford, but also from the leadership of the United Auto Workers union (UAW).

In the run-up to the contract vote, the UAW International sent out representatives to convince workers to vote for the new concessions. But during these visits, the first signs of dissent began to emerge.

While visiting the Dearborn Truck plant in Michigan, UAW Vice President Bob King was prevented from speaking in favor of concessions on the shop floor. After stopping the assembly line and drawing together several hundred workers, King attempted to address the crowd.

According to UAW activist Ron Lare: “When [Bob King] asked ‘Can you hear me?’ some shouted ‘No.’ Then, it was as if they realized what they were saying, and everybody picked it up: ‘No! No! No!’ with hand-clapping and foot-stomping.”

Rank and File Opposition Needed

In the immediate aftermath of the “No” vote, we published an article on SocialistAlternative.org calling for a conference to gather activists and map out a way forward. This idea, also taken up by others, is now moving forward with a conference planned for January 23 in Detroit (details at soldiersofsolidarity.com). We will be discussing how to use the victory and momentum of the contract defeat to build opposition to concessions in the UAW. At the time of print, the January 23 conference has not yet happened, but look for analysis at socialistalternative.org.

Socialist Alternative wholeheartedly supports this call for a conference, and Socialist Alternative members are building for it. It's necessary to build a new, militant rank-and-file opposition movement within the UAW that can act as an alternative center of gravity to resist concessions. We hope this can be a first step towards reclaiming the UAW as a fighting organization that defends

What Program?

The UAW leadership points to plummeting auto sales and the industry's deep crisis of overcapacity, arguing that concessions, layoffs, and plant closures are necessary to return the auto companies to profitability.

To be taken seriously, any opposition must present a clear programmatic alternative to the UAW leadership, including:

- **No more layoffs, factory closures, and outsourcing!** If the auto companies can't maintain jobs and our nation's industrial base, then they should be taken into public ownership and democratically managed by elected representatives of workers and the wider public.
- **For a massive, federally funded, green jobs program, including a huge expansion of public transit.** Retool the auto industry to build buses, trains, wind turbines, and other socially necessary green production as part of a coordinated economic plan to create jobs and to address the looming climate crisis.
- **For the transformation of the UAW into a fighting, democratic union** that puts itself at the forefront of the wider struggle for jobs and environmental sustainability.