

What Would Walter Reuther Do?

During World War II the U.S. government told the auto companies they weren't to produce cars, but whatever was needed for the war. Well there's a war on now! It's an economic war in which working people are losing our jobs, our health care, and our houses. So it's necessary to turn the plants into producing what's needed. For starters we should be producing:

- Fuel-efficient vehicles
- Machinery to produce renewable energy including wind and water turbines and solar panels
- Trains and buses for mass transit and light rail

When autoworkers' wages and benefits represent 10 percent or less of the total corporation's expense, why do corporations and the federal government demand more concession from workers? Are we the ones who designed products that no one can afford to buy?

Is the economic crisis to be one placed on the backs of working people, and particularly autoworkers? The UAW has reluctantly agreed to reopen the contract, hoping to cut a bit from here and there. So Chrysler workers are supposed to give up the Easter Monday holiday, agree to the cutting of relief time and allow overtime to be calculated after 40 hours a week not after 8-hours a day. We are supposed to feel good that we still have SUB and COLA although SUB is cut back and COLA and Performance Bonuses are suspended. We're not supposed to remember that SUB, Performance Bonuses and COLA are deferred payments we have already earned. Retirees are having their vision and dental cut! Plus, we will be forced into arbitration in '11 and not allowed wages and benefit better than the transplants with no right to strike at the end of the contract! They can have as many temporary workers as they want with their low wages frozen until 2015.

It's ridiculous for the companies to demand that we lose break time or another holiday when they are trying to lay people off, causing even more jobs to be lost. Reducing the work week to 32 hours without loss in pay makes a lot more sense because it saves jobs. Some may look over the full agreement and conclude they have to vote for a bad contract because at least they might be able to hang on to their job. But we know this isn't the first set of concessions and it won't be the last. If we stand back and "look at this picture," we know we cannot solve the economic crisis by further cuts in our wages, benefits and working conditions.

The companies talk about how much they need to stay afloat, but when the governments around the world shell out the money, it seems like it's only in the United States and Canada where they demand concessions from the workers. The government ought to require—as they have in France and Japan—that if there are to be loans to the companies, workers must not be laid off.

The fact is that auto companies have attempted to whipsaw one plant against each another, whether it's a plant just down the road, a plant in a "right-to-work for less" state, or one half-way around the world. But auto plants don't have to be limited to vehicles that aren't selling!

Instead of all the negotiations over an unfunded VEBA, let's change the inadequate and patchwork system of health care. Why should American workers, in the 21st century, fight with our employers to get the health care coverage we need? We are the only industrialized country in the world that when a worker loses his/her job, health care benefits disappear too. Let's move to a single-payer system that the UAW demanded more than fifty years ago. By eliminating the "for-big-profit" insurance system we could immediately cut the cost by at least 20 percent and begin to provide quality care for all, including dental and long-term care.

Once upon a time everyone in our community understood that unionized autoworkers fought and won good wages and benefits that raised the standard for all workers, whether in a union or not. Ever since the air traffic controllers were fired by President Reagan, higher-paid workers have been demonized. We are not the cause of the problem but the source of the solution. We demand good jobs for ourselves, our communities and our children. It's time to stop the concessions: Vote no.