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USA

United Auto Workers Elects New Leadership, a Rank-and-File Victory

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The United Auto Workers (UAW), once the flagship of the American labor movement, later an authoritarian and corrupt organization, has just elected a new union leadership committed to reform. The vote is still being counted, but the reformers could take all the top offices in the union. The reformers' victory in this election opens the possibility making fundamental progressive change in what is one of the country's largest industrial unions, which also represents many workers in higher education. But the reformers will face enormous challenges as they deal with the union's old leadership, the employers, and the government.

Organized in the 1930s through factory occupations, mass picket lines, and battles with scabs and police, the left-led union succeeded in organizing the big three automakers: General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler as well as many parts suppliers. By the 1940s as the plants turned toward war production, the UAW reached over one million members. Walter Reuther, union president from 1940 to 1970, was a social democrat, who supported the Black civil rights movement and the Latino farmworkers, but he also created a highly centralized caucus, a "one-party state," that dominated the union for seventy years.

The union has suffered several crises. In the 1960s when Black workers made demands on both the auto companies and the union, the union sent white workers to physically attack a Black workers' protest. In the 1970s militant workers, some of them Vietnam War veterans, pushed the union to carry out militant strikes against GM. Then in the 1980s, facing German and Japanese competition, the U.S. automakers began to close some of their older plants and also demanded and won concessions in wages and benefits. In response, rank-and-file activists created "locals against concessions." In the 1980s and 90s, the companies adopted what has been called "Toyota" management but is better defined as "lean production" or "management by stress." The UAW entered into partnership with the companies, creating many joint programs—such as Quality Circles—that soon eclipsed the union.

In the twenty-first century, the UAW leadership became utterly corrupt, embezzling more than a million dollars from the union for luxury travel and extravagant personal expenses. Several UAW officials, including two former presidents, pleaded guilty and were sentenced to one- to six-years imprisonment. Seeing the need for reform, workers created Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD).

But this is not the UAW of old. When auto plants closed, the UAW lost members, the union began to organize in other sectors, like education. So the UAW today is no long solely an industrial union. Altogether the union has 391,000 active members and 580,000 retired members who also vote in union elections. But of the active members, over one quarter are now university graduate student workers.

The courts intervened in the union and gave workers options, so members voted in 2021 to end the practice of electing leaders at national union conventions and instead let members vote directly on top officers. Reformers then created a slate called UAW Members United. Reformers called for "no corruption, no concessions, and no tiers." (Tiers refers to different pay rates for different groups of workers doing the same jobs.) The reformers won several posts in the leadership election that just took place. But only 106,000 of the nearly one million active and retired worker voted. So while there is a new leadership, it has not been propelled to power either by a widespread militant worker upsurge in the workplaces nor by a powerful movement for reform. (45,000 graduate student workers are now on strike in California, but their region did not support the reformers.)

Several of the reformers have experience at the local level, but they have not led a national union, and now they now

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face big challenges. They will need our solidarity.

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