

# Business Unionism vs. Class Struggle

## Which Program for Auto Workers?

Spartacist League (U.S.)

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Faced with a deteriorating competitive position internationally, the auto companies have been attempting to boost their profit margins through productivity drives combining fantastic speedup, long overtime hours and increased layoffs, further aided by the capitalist government's wage-freezing policies. Recent statements by various UAW officers, pledging "reasonable" bargaining and urging voluntary wage-price restraints for the upcoming contract, have the clear purpose of shackling auto workers to the companies' steamroller profit drive.

### **Woodcock's Bargaining Program: Don't Tie Me Down**

The Collective Bargaining Program, passed with only scattered opposition at the 22-23 March Detroit Bargaining Convention, pleads with management to agree with a "harmony clause" which defines the supposed identity of interests shared by the companies and the union. Despite its 43-page length, the program fails to include any hard bargaining proposals, leaving Woodcock and friends plenty of room to maneuver and sell out, as the bargaining proceeds.

On speedup, the program vaguely pledges to seek "further protection" in line with the UAW's "historic opposition to any attempt to speedup." This "historic opposition" is a complete fabrication since the UAW bureaucracy has consistently over the years allowed the companies total control over line speed, layoffs and working conditions, in exchange for a few cents an hour wage increase.

On overtime, the bureaucrats make a concession to the ranks by declaring that "what workers really want is that overtime be voluntary and not compulsory" but then leave the backdoor open by emphasizing increased overtime rates, thus suggesting a settlement in which overtime would just cost the companies a bit more.

On wages, the program does not reject the UAW's traditional acceptance of company policies of tying wages to productivity increases plus cost of living raises, and simply suggests that current arithmetic in determining these factors may need "adjustment." Nowhere in this program does the Woodcock regime oppose the government's wage freeze (still in effect, even though price controls have been

abolished), much less call for a struggle to break the controls, How could they, with woodcock himself on the advisory board (and now the parallel board on National Industrial Peace, a polite phrase for strikebreaking and union-busting)?

On working conditions, which are so rapidly deteriorating, the program contains not one single demand, but instead vaguely calls for “management and the union to embark on a joint, cooperative endeavor in which they seek out and mutually implement the ways and means to achieve this next step in the democratization of the workplace—creating job satisfaction for the individual worker, to enhance the quality of work life and give it deeper meaning and significance”!

The whole program of the bureaucrats is summed up neatly in their own words that “we will not go to the bargaining table in 1973 looking for a fight.” This sweet talk for the companies means a sure sellout for auto workers.

## Class Struggle vs. Sellout

While UAW leaders prepare their cozy deals with the companies, autoworkers must face the rapidly deteriorating working conditions in the plants, the murderous speedup and compulsory overtime, the galloping inflation and the threat of unemployment in the recession already being predicted for the coming fall. No cozy deals for the ranks! For the mass of the working class the only alternative to the sellout policies of the labor bureaucracy is a program of revolutionary struggle.

The conditions in the auto shops spontaneously throw up a number of demands as an instinctive reaction of self-defense. These include, for instance, strikes against the wage freeze, 30 hours work for 40 hours pay, voluntary overtime, rapid settlement of grievances, lowering the line speed and including it in the contract and international strike action by autoworkers. In different combinations, such demands constitute the program of practically every opposition group in the UAW.

It is the duty of every class-conscious militant to resolutely lead the fight against the capitalists in strikes called on the basis of even such limited class demands. But as communists we must also explain that these demands are by themselves insufficient. Even with speeded-up grievance procedures, for instance, the ultimate power still remains with the company, which means constant harassment by foremen, attempts to increase the speed of production, arbitrary firings, etc. The situation urgently calls for raising the demand of **workers control of production** and the **formation of factory committees** to fight for this demand. Even “30 for 40” is only a concrete application of the demand for **no layoffs**, a **sliding scale of wages and hours** to provide work for all. Since the capitalists will naturally claim bankruptcy when faced with such demands, it is necessary to call for **opening the books** and for **expropriation of the auto companies without compensation**. Clearly such far-reaching demands cannot be won simply by militant plant struggles, and thus it is imperative to take the fight to the political level, by calling for a

**workers party** based on the trade unions and for a **workers government** to implement such a program. All of these **transitional** demands start from the immediate conditions facing the workers in the shops, but point to the inescapable conclusion that to change the present dehumanizing conditions it is necessary to change the whole system under which we live. While supporting struggles around even the most minimal class demands, it is the duty of communists to widen the struggle, to raise transitional demands which lead to the achievement of the **real** answer to workers exploitation—socialist revolution. A trade-union program limited to simple trade-union demands, in contrast, is necessarily a reformist program, a program which in this epoch can only lead to **defeat** for the class.

The response of the American left to the crushing defeat planned for auto workers by the Big 3 and the UAW tops is virtually uniform. From the Stalinist CP, to the Maoists, to the social-democratic International Socialists, to the pseudo-Trotskyist Workers League there exists a remarkable consensus: Now is “not the time” for resolutely advancing a program of revolutionary transitional demands designed to break the auto ranks from their treacherous misleaders and prepare them for battle against both their employers and the capitalist state; rather, it is time to string together a hodge-podge of reformist demands restricted firmly **within** the framework of capitalism. This logic prepares virtually every left organization for capitulation to one or another wing of the trade-union bureaucracy or its would-be, look-alike replacements.

The trade-union work of any working-class tendency is a revealing index of its real character: Not only is it here that self-avowed revolutionary organizations present their face directly to the organized working class, but also it is here that the day-to-day pressures toward accommodation and reformism are greatest. Particularly at contract time, pressures mount enormously “to fight for something we can win **now**.” Most of the American left has predictably caved in to these pressures in the current UAW-Big 3 bargaining maneuvers.

## United National Caucus

The only visible national grouping inside the UAW aspiring to “dissident” status, the United National Caucus (UNC), proved itself to be completely impotent in the face of Woodcock’s laundry list of ambiguous proposals. UNC co-chairman Pete Kelly spoke from the convention floor noting the “many good things in the bargaining resolution” but expressing skepticism that they would be won. He proceeded to key in on the blatantly class-collaborationist “harmony clause.” In effect, Kelly attempted to shame the leaders and delegates into opposing this clause, hinting how difficult it would be to defend it before the ranks, while ignoring the fact that it precisely defined the existing relationship between bureaucracy and company.

Edith Fox was the only other prominent UNC member to speak on the floor. She gave the typical “trade-union militant” speech, predicting a sellout in the

bargaining process and calling for “workers control” over conditions. But an examination of what the UNC means by “workers control” is just one illustration of how radical phraseology receives reformist content in the mouths of opportunists.

Writing in 1931, Trotsky explained the revolutionary content of this demand:

Workers control through factory councils is conceivable only on the basis of sharp class struggle, not collaboration. But this really means dual power in the enterprises, in the trusts, in all branches of industry, in the whole economy.”

—The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany

The UNC transforms “workers control from a demand linked inextricably to the call for expropriation of industry and the construction of a workers government into a formal contractual reform, to be negotiated and enforced as if it were a pension proposal!

Thus both Kelly and Fox continued the UNC’s apolitical brand of “militant trade unionism.” Even the call for a congress of labor to build a labor party (albeit a proposal with no programmatic content aside from the UNC’s reformist pablum), passed at the UNC’s February Production Workers’ Conference, was not mentioned at the UAW Bargaining Convention. Just as at the 1972 UAW Convention, when the UNC submerged its “politics” (the call for a labor party and nominal opposition to the Vietnam war) in favor of a bloc with other caucuses to push for referendum election of International officers, the UNC again demonstrated its gross opportunism.

## **International Socialists Support Aspiring Bureaucrats**

The left social-democratic International Socialists (IS) is the most important “left” cover for the UNC. Having accomplished a turn from New Left middle-class radicalism, the IS is now the foremost bearer of “radical workerism,” a more proletarian-tinted version of its previous opportunist politics. Based on the belief that repeated struggle around shop-floor issues will lead the working class to socialist consciousness while simultaneously assuring its organization a “working-class character,” the IS’s theories comprise a contemporary re-creation of the revisionist theories of spontaneity, economism and trade-union reformism that the Marxist movement has continually been forced to struggle against.

Indeed, to discuss the UNC’s reformist program is to describe the IS’s, for the IS raises no independent positions and limits its public differences with the UNC to tactful advice and polite criticism. Thus, Workers’ Power No. 75 (30 March-12 April), reporting on the UAW Bargaining Convention, noted the UNC’s “excellent alternative program of contract demands” but sighed that the UNC leadership was “unprepared” and without a “clear strategy for a fight against Woodcock.”

## Communist Party and Progressive Labor

The Communist Party's approach to the UAW is characterized by a cringing cowardliness even surpassing the UNC and IS. Concerned lest it appear a counterposed leadership, the CP's reportage of events in the UAW varies from slight criticism of Woodcock to glowing reports of his latest proposals to this or that Congressional Committee, masterfully transforming "objective reporting" into tacit approval.

The CP's specific program for the upcoming contract was outlined in the 13 February Daily World., The only real points of note were the call for a permanent production workers council and the call for an end to overtime with 30 hours work for 40 hours pay.

The proposal for a permanent production workers council (also supported by the UNC and IS) is clearly meaningless without a struggle for an alternative UAW leadership based on a revolutionary program. The discovery of the "30 for 40" demand is relatively new for the CP. But with the incredible speedup and overtime in the auto plants, and with rising unemployment, the CP was forced to include this demand in its grab-bag, but only at the expense of robbing it of its essential revolutionary thrust, and turning it into a presumably "winnable" reform.

This course is perfectly in line with the CP's "anti-monopoly coalition" strategy: a strategy based on pressuring the liberal wing of the ruling class for a more peaceful, "kind," domesticated imperialism. The CP's recent "left turn" away from overt support to the Democratic Party is only a tactical ploy designed to increase its own role in managing a more "liberal" capitalist order. Its work in the trade unions continues to serve its real appetites: blocs with liberal bureaucrats and capitalists for the preservation of "peacefully coexisting" international capitalism.

The Progressive Labor Party (PL), caught in a period of organizational disintegration and rapid rightward retreat, has also latched onto "30 for 40" as a cure-all for the working class. The 22 March *Challenge* lists a multitude of issues confronting the auto workers on the eve of the Detroit Bargaining Convention (layoffs, speedup, inflation, working conditions, etc.) and proudly proclaims: "the answer to ALL these problems? UAW members in Workers Action Movement had one—Thirty Hours Work for Forty Hours Pay."

Like the CP, PL for years opposed the call for "30 for 40" as "Trotskyite" and "utopian." But seeking a single-issue gimmick to arouse its demoralized and confused members, who have been leaving PL in droves, it has now decided that this demand is really only a reform demand—the best reform demand. PL continually stresses that "30 for 40" is "possible" under capitalism, that some unions already have a shorter work week and that the capitalists could still make plenty of profits. Consequently, PL's supporters in the unions say they are for "32 for 40" or "36 for 40" as well; there is no real difference to them.

## Workers League Defends Simple Trade Unionism

In contrast to the previously mentioned groups, the Workers League sports a facade of Trotskyism but only as a cover for its consistently opportunist appetites. Thus the WL calls for a labor party, but proposes that it be built by the present trade-union bureaucracy! Likewise it calls for a Marxist opposition in the unions, while at the same time proclaiming that the key issue is a 20% wage increase.

Earlier this year the WL set up the “Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party” as a vehicle to coordinate its relatively sparse trade-union work. By its name the TUALP brings to mind the ill-fated “Trade Unionists for a Labor Party,” set up by the WL in 1967. At that time, these “Trotskyists” vigorously opposed adopting motions (offered by the Spartacist League) which would give a revolutionary programmatic content to the call for a labor party. (The WL explicitly refused to include in the program any mention of opposition to racial oppression or the imperialist Vietnam war.)

True to form, at the February TUALP conference a program was adopted for a “National Auto Caucus” which contains **not one single demand going beyond simple trade unionism**. Some “Marxist opposition” this, which finds it impossible to mention international working-class solidarity, opposition to racial and sexual discrimination, workers control of production, expropriation of the auto industry without compensation—omitting even the call for a labor party and a workers government! Instead they concentrate on issues such as “30 and out,” increased vacations and a 20 percent wage increase (Bulletin, 26 March 1973).

In the same issue, the Bulletin publishes an “Open Letter to the United National Caucus” by Rudy Sulenta, a supporter of TUALP. Introducing the letter, it writes that “A very important step was taken to build a national caucus in the UAW with a campaign for a 20 percent increase in pay.” Sulenta makes it even more explicit, declaring that “contrary to what Woodcock says, the central issue in the upcoming contract is the fight over wage increases. . . It is the fight for a 20 percent wage increase. . . that the political fight is raised.” Sulenta rightly accuses the UNC leadership of reducing the struggle to simple trade union policies and ignoring its own demand for a labor party. But then that is precisely what the TUALP auto caucus program does as well!

In short the WL has capitulated to the pressures for a “here and now” program of contract demands, separated from any kind of revolutionary perspective. Moreover, it plays directly into the bureaucracy’s hands by proclaiming the wage struggle the “central issue” of the 1973 contract. For years the UAW tops have sold out on working conditions and local grievances in exchange for some limited wage gains.

Well aware of the opportunist implications of the TUALP auto caucus program, and feeling rather unprotected on its left flank, the Bulletin took the unusual step of actually replying to an article in the last issue of *Workers Vanguard* on

the auto negotiations. According to the WL's front page editorial: "Spartacist says essentially the following about the struggle in auto. Wages, line speed, job security, grievances and the right to strike are all trade union demands. But Marxists, at least according to Spartacist, are for revolution as opposed to winning these 'reformist' demands. Spartacist therefore concludes that the basic demand that must be made is: 'Communism.'" Wohlforth is a past master at polemic by non-quotation, a method which permits him the liberty of freely distorting his opponents' arguments out of all recognition. Let us see what the WV article actually said:

"One is struck by an amazing similarity between these programs [of the CP, IS and WL], which share a number of elements: higher wages, shorter hours, the right to strike, a range of minor reforms and the complete absence of anything that would qualitatively distinguish them from old-fashioned, 'pure-and-simple' reformist trade unionism,

"Nowhere do any of these groups pose the necessity for a struggle for power. . . . Instead, the long-range goal is always separated from, and subordinate to, the immediate economic demands of the next set of contract negotiations. . . . Certainly it is essential for revolutionists to participate in the everyday struggles of the workers over wages, hours and working conditions in order to ensure the closest contact between the class and the party. . . . This does not mean, however, that we attempt to win leadership as simple trade unionists. . . . We aspire to lead the class as communists, which will often necessarily entail counter posing the historic world-wide interests of the proletariat to its immediate consciousness."

Where in this do you read the Spartacist League opposes winning reform demands, Brother Wohlforth? You can indeed read that we oppose merely raising contract reform demands in separation from the overall revolutionary program. You can read in our press that the SL, together with Trotsky, believes that the transitional program is the program for struggle in the unions, not bits and pieces of the program, or simple trade union reform demands. And it is this which grates on the WL, for it is precisely trade-union reformism which is the methodology of the TUALP auto caucus program and this Bulletin editorial.

## **Wohlforth Repudiates Transitional Program**

The Bulletin article goes on to dot the "i's" and cross the "t's" of its opportunism, declaring that "the point is that trade union questions are becoming revolutionary issues. . . . But the fact is that the fundamental contradiction within capitalism, suppressed for an entire historical period through wild inflation [!], is radically transforming the relations between classes. . . . That is why simple trade union demands are so profoundly revolutionary today."

This nonsense clearly reveals the objectivism which lies at the heart of Wohlforth's "dialectics." In this anti-Marxist view, the objective factors completely dominate

social struggles and the struggle for the revolutionary program is therefore irrelevant. Earlier, the transitional program was, for Wohlforth, inapplicable because the fundamental contradiction of capitalism was “suppressed for an entire historical period” (shades of Mandel’s “neocapitalism”?). And today it has become superfluous; now even simple trade union demands are revolutionary. Thus the WL now formalizes its repudiation of the transitional program.

The WL’s logic is that the final “crisis” of capitalism (whose imminent arrival the WL has been heralding since 1962 or so) is now so grave that consistent reformist struggle—e.g., for wage increases—becomes inherently revolutionary. This exactly parallels the petty-bourgeois line of the SWP that “consistent nationalism” (or “consistent feminism,” for that matter) is socialism. The purpose of the WL’s endless crisis-mongering is to justify an openly reformist program. The WL reasons that trade-union bureaucrats can be forced into building a labor party and aspiring bureaucrats can be supported because they will inevitably be forced to fight for the interests of the working class. This was precisely the logic of Pabloism, the post-war revisionism which shattered the Fourth International: that Stalinists and social-democrats could be forced to lead the proletarian revolution under the pressure of the “objective situation.”

Certainly it is true that reform struggles have revolutionary implications. The link is this: In the epoch of declining capitalism (imperialism) it is not possible to win systematic reforms which qualitatively improve the conditions of the working class without destroying the capitalist system itself. Therefore, in fighting for reform demands it is absolutely essential that revolutionaries concretely link these struggles to the fight for socialism. To fight simply for trade-union demands, as the WL does, leaves the class unprepared for the battle necessary to win them, and implies a utopia in which auto workers will have “30 for 40,” \$650/month pensions after 30 years, 20 percent wage increases and the like—without smashing capitalism. Transitional demands begin with the concrete needs of the class (for instance, a struggle against the killing overtime, unemployment, inflation and dangerous working conditions), and formulate an alternative which directly leads to an attack on the system itself (sliding scale of wages and hours, workers control of production), linking this explicitly to the struggle for power (workers party and workers government). But to the “Marxists” of the Workers League, the struggle for this program is “abstract propaganda” as opposed to their own, very concrete agitation—for a few more crumbs.

Wohlforth’s “theories” were answered some 70 years ago by Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?*:

“The economic struggle merely ‘impels’ the workers to realize the government’s attitude towards the working class. Consequently, however much we may try to ‘lend the economic struggle itself a political character,’ we shall never be able to develop the political consciousness of the workers (to the level of social-democratic political consciousness) by keeping within the framework of the economic struggle, for that framework is too narrow.”



It is not enough to simply have the largest list of demands at contract time, nor to ask for the “most” in the collective bargaining relationship. It is necessary to transcend the strictly economic relation of capitalist to worker to lead to the understanding of the nature of the capitalist order as a whole, and the need for the independent mobilization of the working class to destroy it. This is the approach of the Spartacist League, the Marxist approach, to work in the trade unions.