United Auto Workers Union: A Case Study in Bureaucratic Unionism

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The trajectory of the United Auto Workers union illustrates the consolidation of top-down control in national unions in the USA in the decades after World War 2.

A vast movement of hundreds of thousands of workers forming new independent unions unfolded in 1933–34. Another expression of this drive for self-organization from below was the creation of 1,734 AFL "federal locals." These were local industrial unions that were not affiliated to any international union. They were directly attached to the AFL national office. Most were in the auto and rubber manufacturing industries. A.J. Muste estimated the auto industry federal locals had 60,000 members in Detroit and 150,000 elsewhere in 1934. The United Auto Workers union (UAW) came out of this movement.

The problem with the "federal locals" was the way the AFL kept them on a tight leash. As Edward Levinson put it in *Rise of the Auto Worker*s, "These federal locals turned out to be about as worthless as the company unions. They…could not bargain, strike, or draw up a contract for themselves." When the auto industry federal locals demanded a national strike in March 1934, the AFL top leaders yielded to FDR's requests for a postponement and then accepted a settlement brokered by the federal mediators. This contract contained a clause allowing the employers to fire employees for "merit," which would allow the companies to get rid of union advocates because it was based on management's judge of "merit."

The AFL capitulation to FDR's pro-company settlement in 1934 led to workers moving away from the federal locals to the creation of independent unions. In 1935 the Auto Industry Workers Association began at Dodge and spread to other plants. AFL officials feared this would lead to a new national auto industry union outside the AFL. In 1934 the Communist Party officially changed its own labor organizing strategy. Seeing the huge growth of the independent unions, the CP decided to dissolve their own party-controlled Trade Union Unity League, and merge the TUUL with the independent unions, creating a new "class struggle unionist federation" separate from the AFL. Writing in *The Communist* in June, 1934, CP trade union secretary Jack Stachel believed the Communists could peel the federal locals away from the AFL and bring them into this proposed federation.

The Communist Party intervention in the federal locals in the auto industry was designed to thwart the efforts of AFL top officials and staff organizers who opposed strikes and pushed for a

reliance on Democratic Party officials and the arbitration scheme under the National Recovery Act. For example, a sudden cut in piece-work rates at Nash in Kenosha, Wisconsin in November, 1933 sparked a spontaneous walkout of 200 workers. The company then locked out all two thousand workers in the plant. Although the Communists and the independent auto union called for a mass strike, the local AFL paid organizer squelched the talk of a strike and called in the federal mediation board. But this board's settlement simply granted the employer the pay cut they wanted — a settlement the Communists denounced as "shameful."

To head off a general movement of auto workers to build their own national union from the bottom up, the AFL finally created the United Auto Workers International Union in August 1935. A new constitution was imposed top down. The AFL heads appointed a useless hack, Francis Dillon, as president of the UAW. At the second convention of the UAW in April 1936 the Communists and other socialists had a secure majority. They were able to toss out Dillon and were in a position to remake the UAW constitution. By the spring of 1936, however, the CP was already moving to its new Popular Front position with its emphasis on an alliance with the so-called "progressive" trade union bureaucrats like CIO leaders John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman. The CP was sliding away from its emphasis on direct rank-and-file control of unions which was a feature of their rhetoric and organizing in 1932–34. Despite the CP's rhetoric about "rank-and-file control" in the UAW in 1936, the convention did nothing to restructure the UAW away from the highly centralized setup with power centered in the paid officials of the International Executive Board.

The UAW is a top-down, staff-driven bureaucratic machine. The convention is a key decision-making body. But delegates do not control the convention. Committees play a key role in conventions. This is where constitutional amendments or policy proposals and other key issues are developed. Only committees can introduce proposals. These convention committees are appointed by the International Executive Board.

At a local union meeting, members have the right to introduce amendments to proposals from the floor. But the UAW constitution also does not allow delegates the right to make amendments from the floor at a convention. Convention delegates are supposed to have vote strength in proportion to the number of members they represent. In practice this is never followed. To register the vote strength of each delegate you'd need a roll call vote, and these never happen. It takes 30 percent of delegates to force a roll call and there are few moments in a convention when there are 30 percent of delegates on the floor. So voice or hand votes are used, which ignores the fact that some delegates represent more workers.

Moreover, there is also a pattern of obvious discrimination by the chair at UAW conventions. In his memoir, *An Auto Worker's Journal*, Frank Marquardt describes what he witnessed at UAW conventions:

> "The chairman…allowed [convention] committee members and officers to speak more often and for much longer periods than he granted opposition speakers. And when recognizing delegates from the floor, he conveniently overlooked known oppositionists, especially if they happened to be capable floor speakers."

Because the IEB was divided by factionalism in the early years, there were majority and minority reports from convention committees and lively convention debate. During the late 1930s and early 1940s UAW local meetings were often mass events with high attendance and debates

between partisans of the different political tendencies in the union. But this can give a misleading picture. There was open debate in the UAW in those years because the top leaders on the IEB were divided by factionalism. The IEB in the early years had to contend with the high level of local debate and internal struggle in the union that came out of the way the UAW had come together. Despite the top-down constitution, the UAW absorbed a movement of self-organized federal locals and independent unions in the auto industry.

After Walter Reuther consolidated his hold after his election as president in 1947, this brought an end to the factionalism. The highly centralized constitution of the UAW facilitated concentration of power in a powerful bureaucratic layer.

According to Jack Stieber in *Governing the UAW*, Reuther's election was followed by "a mopping up operation in which the administration brought to bear the full power of the international union — sometimes exceeding its constitutional authority — against hard core opposition locals and their leaders." A centralized feature of the UAW are the "international representatives" assigned by HQ to the local unions. The Reuther regime used these to interfere in local elections against opposition leaders. If new opposition activists tried to run against local leaders who support the Administration Caucus (derived from Reuther's group in the late 1940s), they would get the aid of P.R. specialists from Solidarity House (UAW HQ) to develop their campaign literature. The local administration also monopolizes the local union newspaper or other communications.

Before a union convention, there are national and regional caucus meetings. Dianne Feeley recently described how this works:

> "The [Administration Caucus] controls the union's headquarters (Solidarity House), its regional offices, its organizers, its communication and education networks, and its power to appoint people to a variety of jobs off the line. It nominates one of its members to run for every union office, and provides material aid to win. At conventions, it invites delegates to attend its meetings and then binds them to the positions taken. As an efficient jobs program, the caucus replenishes itself. This year more than 90 percent of the delegates to the union's Bargaining Convention were members."

Moreover, the local unions in the UAW constitution are totally subordinate bodies that must adhere to International Union policies. The IEB can place a local union in trusteeship if it violates policy decided on at the International Union level. The huge bureaucratic apparatus of the UAW is a major source of jobs which have often been used to co-opt militants by offering them a way to escape the harsh conditions of the factory. Frank Marquardt describes the case of a former militant who was rewarded with a staff job after he voted in favor of a dues increase at a union convention — against the wishes of his base:

> "He knew that [international] representatives were paid at least two and one-half times as much money as he did; they did not have to submit to factory discipline, breathe in factory pollution, eat indigestible food from factory lunch wagons, and they always wore white-collar clothes instead of work clothes. He felt that he too was qualified to perform the duties of an international representative."

In the Thirties the union might have a real presence in the shop with shop stewards working to mobilize actions — such as slow-downs or stop-work protests — to fight back on conditions

and arbitrary management actions. After World War 2 the stepped grievance procedure was introduced into contracts. This takes grievance struggle off the shop floor, moved to meetings dominated by lawyers and arbitrators. The stepped grievance procedure and contract limits on strike action take issues out of the workplace. And if we suppose a worker were to go to a UAW local union meeting in more recent years to discuss such questions, the officials would tell them they need to file a grievance. Then the leaders would move on to talk about the importance of voting for Democrats.

The deal with the employers under the stepped grievance procedure and no-strike contracts often meant abandoning the struggle over conditions in the shop. By the Sixties this led to a growing level of discontent among rank-and-file industrial workers with speed-up, dangerous conditions, and harsh supervisors — especially among younger workers. And black workers faced employer discrimination and racist supervisors. By the late 1960s and early '70s growing discontent often took the form of wildcat strikes as well as rank-and-file opposition caucuses.

The UAW bureaucracy's response to the wildcat strikes and discontent is illustrated by the vindictive way they smashed wildcat strikes in Detroit in 1973. In the course of one month, workers shut down three Chrysler plants by strong wildcats. At the Jefferson assembly plant, two workers locked themselves in the electrical cage and shut off power. They were surrounded and defended by hundreds of co-workers. As a result, the security guards and Detroit police couldn't easily get to the two men in the electrical cage. In this case the workers were demanding that Chrysler fire the racist and abusive general foreman. The company agreed in writing to fire the foreman and not penalize anyone involved in this sitdown.

But that solution was unacceptable to the UAW bureaucracy. Chrysler Vice President Doug Fraser said the company should not have given in to the workers. The stance of the UAW bureaucracy was made quite plain a few days later when a wildcat strike shut down Chrysler Forge for ten days, due to firings and injuries to workers. The UAW promised they would authorize a strike if people went back to work. In a vote workers were split narrowly but UAW staff pushed strongly for a return to work. Once they were back in the plant, UAW refused to authorize a strike. At the Mack Avenue stamping plant, Chrysler fired five workers for leading a fight to get more fans, due to high temperatures in the plant. There were other conditions that resulted in injuries to workers. When fired workers tried to get support from other workers, they were attacked by guards and this provoked a sitdown strike. To end the sitdown, Chrysler issued a fake story about a bomb in the plant. This led to a solid picket line to defend their strike. UAW went on radio and TV to lie about the strike, saying it was led by "outside agitators." But Chrysler couldn't reopen the plant due to the picket line. So the UAW organized a streak-breaking force of 700 staff and officials, armed with sticks, canes, pipes and knives. They proceeded to threaten and beat up picketers. These actions of the UAW indicate clearly the way the UAW had become cops for management — to crush shopfloor resistance and act as enforcers of management power.

Prior to the Sixties, the Administration Caucus had always blocked election of black workers or did not appoint them to staff positions. In the Sixties, however, black workers in UAW-organized auto plants also posed a challenge to the bureaucratic apparatus with the emergence of the Revolutionary Union Movements linked to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers — Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), General Motors Revolutionary Union Movement (GRUM), Ford Revolutionary Union Movement (FRUM) and so on. These rank-and-file movements responded to the harsh conditions and racist supervisors in the plants. The Administration Caucus responded to this situation by moving to co-opt black activists into their regime.

With a large cache of jobs they can hand out to supporters, these jobs are used to bring potential opponents into the ruling group. The jobs pay far more than working on the line and free workers of the harsh conditions in the plant. But keeping the job requires loyalty to the regime.

"Partnership" with management was the approach pursued by Reuther and continued through seventy years of Administration Caucus rule in the UAW. The recent corruption scandal that has led to multiple indictments of UAW officers and staff falls out of the lack of democratic worker control in the UAW and the domination of the union by a case-hardened, centralized paid bureaucracy, controlled top down from the International Executive Board.

The controlling bureaucracy fell into a pattern of corrupt payoffs from the companies after the passage of the Labor-Management Cooperation Act in 1978. The management of the Big Three automakers used this as the basis for creating a series of joint union/company non-profit corporations to run various joint activities, such as the National Training Center in Detroit. The various joint organizations became a way for the companies to funnel a huge amount of money to finance a vast expansion of the UAW bureaucracy. This allowed the companies to get around laws against direct management control or interference in unions. A whole array of cushy jobs with high pay and little work were created which the Administration Caucus used to buy off opposition and reward their friends. Salaries funneled to the UAW financed more union staff than the traditional elected GM representatives in the union.

Before the onset of these "joint" programs in the 1980s, GM employed more than 440,000 hourly workers in the USA. Today this number has shrunk to less than 50,000. The "jointness" approach did nothing to stem this shrinking of the workforce. It would be more accurate to describe it as the companies paying to ensure no opposition. The New Directions Movement was the last national rank-and-file opposition in the UAW — formed in the 1980s to fight "jointness." Two of the elected leaders of New Directions were Jerry Tucker and Dave Yettaw. In 1988 Tucker was elected Director of Region 5 after the courts ordered a re-run of an election which had been stolen in 1986. After Tucker was elected, the Administration Caucus pulled out all the stops to crush him. A staff "assistant" was appointed to undermine him at every turn. A newsletter mocking and criticizing Tucker was sent to all UAW members in Region 5. The Administration Caucus was thus able to defeat him for re-election.

Dave Yettaw was elected education director of UAW Local 599 in Flint, Michigan in 1987. After he joined up with the New Directions movement, "Solidarity House mounted a well-financed smear campaign to remove Yettaw from office in 1996," according to an in-depth analysis by Thomas Adams. The local branch of the Administration Caucus (the "Unity Caucus") joined with the local Flint newspaper, Chamber of Commerce and the city's mayor to run Yettaw out of office. They claimed that the Buick assembly facility, Buick City, would be closed if Yettaw were re-elected. After Yettaw was defeated, GM went on to announce closing of Buick City six months later. The UAW paid apparatus simply ensured no fightback would take place.

In practice the UAW bureaucracy's commitment to "partnership" unionism means a high priority has been to protect the profitability of the companies. As Dianne Feeley put it: "The UAW leadership views itself as management's partner, responsible for boosting the company's productivity and keeping members in line." They operate on the assumption that protecting company profitability is the way to protect worker interests. This strategy has greased the skids for deterioration in worker pay and conditions. Various interviews with people on the picket lines during the five-week 2019 strike showed a strong desire to stop shutdowns of five plants and end the proliferation of multiple pay tiers and exploitation of temps that has been the GM management

practice since the 2007 bankruptcy. The rank and file wanted a fight for the principle of "equal pay for equal work." But the bargaining with GM was controlled by the Administration Caucus. Ninety percent of the delegates to the 2019 bargaining conference were caucus members.

The UAW bureaucracy, however, had little will to fight for the goals favored by the members. How could they if the aims of the rank and file would seriously cut into GM profits and break the "partnership" relationship? Nor did they have a strategy to achieve those goals. As a result, very little was won, despite a clear will to fight on the part of the rank and file.

The corruption scandals in the UAW led to a federal Monitor being set up over the UAW. Federal monitors had previously been able to impose direct election of the International Executive Boards in the Teamsters and Laborers unions. A rank and file group — Unite All Workers for Democrscy (UAWD) — was formed to bring pressure to bear for direct election of the IEB. With the feds breathing down their necks, a referendum was held where workers voted by a large majority in favor of direct election. The change in the constitution was finally approved at the 2022 UAW convention. Nonetheless, the Administration Caucus — now calling itself the "Mass Caucus" — was up to its old tricks. After delegates voted to increase strike pay, the leaders forced a revote later in the convention when fewer delegates were present and got the strike pay increase revoked. It's very likely the "Mass Caucus" will use all of its considerable resources to get its people elected in the next IEB elections. Moreover, this still does not change the highly concentrated authority in the hands of the IEB and the huge paid apparatus in this staff-driven union.

If there is going to be a union in the auto parts and assembly sector controlled by workers, it's going to have to be a new union that workers create from the bottom up.

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