UAW'S SHOTGUN VOTE AT NEXTEER: SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN SAGINAW



BY WILL LEHMAN
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Brothers and sisters at Nexteer in Saginaw, Michigan: I have been closely following your courageous struggle.

Over the last 12 weeks, you have voted down three United Auto Workers-backed contracts. You have forced local union officials to hold a strike authorization vote, and overwhelmingly voted to walk out to defend your jobs and livelihoods. At every step of the way, UAW officials — from the International down to the regional and local level — have acted not as your representatives but as your enemies.

The ratification vote being organized inside the factory this Thursday and Friday is not a legitimate vote. It is a shotgun affair designed to silence opposition to a pro-company deal and get the contract passed by whatever means necessary.

I urge the 1,700 Nexteer workers at the plant to stand firm and reject the TA. It includes poverty starting wages and raises that keep pay far below what workers at this factory were earning in 2005. It includes phony COLA and profit-sharing schemes. And it will only pave the way for massive job cuts. Those are reasons enough to throw this deal in the garbage.

But this vote should never have been held inside the factory in the first place. Throughout history we have seen such travesties of democratic rights — poll taxes and literacy tests in the Jim Crow South used to deprive African Americans and poor whites of the right to vote; Trump's threats to deploy ICE agents to polling stations during this year's election. What the UAW and management are doing at Nexteer belongs in the same category. This scheme is aimed not at limiting who can vote, but at press-ganging workers into voting yes on a deal they have already rejected three times. It was cooked up by Local 699 and management with the full backing of outgoing Region 1D Director Steve Dawes and International Servicing Rep Jason Tuck in the aftermath of the third contract rejection on May 29.

They deliberately delayed the vote on the fourth TA until after the UAW sold out the American Axle strike and concluded its Constitutional Convention in Detroit. In the meantime, union and management officials tested out their plans by holding contract rollout meetings inside the plant. When Antwiane Sanders called Jason Tuck a "bum," he was unjustly fired — with workers reporting that members of the bargaining committee called HR to terminate a man with more than ten years on the job.

The union hall is no sanctuary free from company spies embedded in the local union apparatus. But in previous ratification votes, rank-and-file workers were able to distribute flyers opposing the TA and openly campaign for its defeat. Now the vote is being held in cafeterias and other spaces inside the plant, and any worker who campaigns openly against the deal on Thursday or Friday risks the same fate as Brother Sanders.

I have also been informed that newly hired workers — some fresh from management orientation sessions — may be voting on this deal. This is a cynical exploitation of workers who have no job security whatsoever. They can be terminated at any moment, and especially so if word gets out that they voted the "wrong way."

UAW President Shawn Fain, Region 1D Director Steve Dawes, and the Local 699 bargaining committee have all sanctioned this betrayal. As Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet, a castle guard warns the prince: "Something is rotten in Denmark" — the people entrusted to protect the kingdom are the ones poisoning it from within. Today we can say with full justification: something is rotten in Saginaw.

This exposes the unbridgeable chasm between the UAW apparatus and the workers on the shop floor. The depth of that chasm was on full display at the recently concluded UAW convention in Detroit. Fain and the apparatus voted themselves raises of $10,000 to $30,000 on the International Executive Board, even as they reneged on promises to reduce union dues. Near the end of the

convention, Fain held a retirement ceremony for Dawes — the architect of the American Axle and Nexteer sellouts — praising him for demonstrating "solidarity that inspires us." Dawes, who pocketed $229,813 last year, will now collect a handsome retirement package paid for by the members he has betrayed.

From the beginning, Fain, Dawes and their apparatus have done everything in their power to keep our struggles isolated and prevent a convergence of battles at Nexteer, American Axle, Dana and other parts suppliers. But the UAW bureaucracy is sitting on a powder keg. Your rebellion is part of a growing revolt across the auto parts sector and the broader working class. Dana workers have massively rejected UAW-backed contracts. So have workers at Bridgewater Interiors. The American Axle settlement will leave those workers earning far less in 2030 than they were making in 2008. And in the Big Three assembly plants, there is widespread and deepening opposition to automation-driven job cuts, forced overtime and deadly working conditions.

That opposition found expression in my nomination at the UAW convention to run for union president. I am not fighting for a seat at Solidarity House. I am fighting to build a movement from below — of rank-and-file workers who will end the corporate dictatorship enforced by the UAW bureaucracy and put power in the hands of workers on the shop floor.

Your experience, and that of hundreds of thousands of other UAW members, underscores the urgent need to build rank-and-file committees and transform every factory and workplace into a citadel of resistance to capitalist exploitation. We are approaching the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States. Those who built the first American republic organized insurgent committees in every town and village to root out the defenders of the British monarchy and fight for equality and self-governance. Today, to fight the modern kings and oligarchs, workers must build that same kind of powerful, self-organized movement in every workplace — and link our struggles against the global corporations with our class brothers and sisters around the world.

One final point. These issues will not be resolved by the outcome of one vote. There is going to be a struggle at Nexteer over job cuts, speedup and working conditions regardless of what happens this week. No worker, young or old, supports this rotten deal — but workers have hit a brick wall with the UAW bureaucracy. That is precisely why the rank-and-file committee you have built must be expanded in the coming weeks and months, so that — as one of you put it so well — authority can be transferred from the UAW apparatus to you yourselves.

Vote NO. Expand the committee. The fight is yours to win.

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