

UAW: From the 2009 NO-Vote by Ford Workers, to the 2010 Convention, to the 2011 Contracts

Gary Walkowicz, a bargaining committeeman at Ford and one of the leaders of the movement that rejected Ford's concession demands last November, was nominated for the presidency of the UAW. His candidacy was supported by workers at Ford who had organized to defeat the concessions pushed by the UAW apparatus.

On the day that activists at the Dearborn Truck Plant passed out a leaflet announcing that they intended to see him nominated at the UAW's June Convention, Walkowicz explained his goal to the *Detroit Free Press* in these words: "*I don't have any illusions that I will win the election, but running is a way to give a voice to the membership.... A lot of workers in the UAW really do not agree with what has happened in the last couple of years with concessions.*"

Despite the support that Walkowicz had among Ford workers, it was obvious that he could not get many votes at the Convention, given the stranglehold wielded by the union apparatus. And he did not. After the chairman declared the election decided, a little more than halfway through the roll call, he ended up with only 74.5 votes – that is, 3.54% of the recorded roll-call – compared to 2114 for Bob King, the president anointed last December by the so-called "Administration Caucus."

But the nomination of Walkowicz was significant. A leader of the fight to refuse concessions ran against one of the main union officials who had pushed the policy of concessions on the workers for years. And, for the first time in 18 years, a UAW convention was forced to resort to an actual vote to elect one of its top officers.

The "Administration Caucus" – An Apparatus Imposed on the Ranks

Over the last six decades, the union's top officers have nearly always been elected by "acclamation" – meaning that they were chosen ahead of time by the Administration Caucus, with few delegates daring to put their name up for the official election held later inside the Convention.

In the first 12 years of its existence, from 1935 to 1947, the UAW knew a real political life, with conventions held every year – sometimes twice a year, with fights on the convention floor over the direction the union should take, and with caucuses formed around some of those differences in the fights for union office. On the political level, there was a wide range of views, above all in the period when there were fights over the no-strike pledge imposed by the government during World War II, a pledge that much of the leadership pushed, but the ranks ignored. But whatever political problems existed – and many did – at the end of the war there was still a great vitality and internal union life in the UAW.

With the coming of the McCarthy period witch-hunt and with the aid of the bourgeois state, an enforcement apparatus was eventually imposed on the UAW to discipline the ranks. The purges of the militants, who only a decade before had built the union, were already beginning in 1947, when Walter Reuther won re-election in the last fully contested election. That election was marked by vicious red-baiting coming from the Reuther camp. The Reuther forces moved over the next four years to establish their stranglehold over the union – expelling militants from the union, taking over local unions from which they couldn't expel the militants, working in collusion with the companies as they fired militants, and encouraging anti-communist gangs, which literally dragged militants out of some plants during work hours, giving companies the pretext to fire them.

Stemming from this activity, Reuther established the enforcement apparatus that eventually came to be known as “the Administration Caucus.” That shadowy apparatus, little talked about in the plants, has controlled the UAW up to this day, holding down every top office in the International and almost all the positions in the regions for the last 62 years, dictating to local officers. Since that Caucus fastened its grip on the union, there have been only four challenges to its choice for UAW president.

In 1970, Art Fox from Ford Local 600 and Pete Kelly from GM Local 160 headed a full slate contesting for all the top offices, reflecting workers’ frustrations at the near freezing of wages during the rapid growth of inflation in the middle and late 1960s, and in opposition to the heavy hand the apparatus was trying to wield against locals in virtual rebellion. But at the Convention, Fox ended up with only 1.62% of the vote. In 1972, Kelly repeated the challenge, this time running on a slate headed by Jordan Sims, a bargaining committeeman from Chrysler, fired after he supported workers in his plant who had wildcatted three times. Sims may have been widely known by workers in the Detroit area, a kind of symbol of the wildcats sweeping through the plants, but he got only 0.72% of the vote at the Convention.

It took another 20 years before anyone else mounted a challenge to the apparatus. Jerry Tucker, who had earlier defeated an Administration Caucus candidate for regional director, campaigned for the presidency in 1992. Tucker’s candidacy reflected widespread resentment against the concessions and “whipsawing,” that is, setting one plant against another in a downward bidding war to get or keep work. The Administration Caucus pushed a kind of protection racket – “If you vote for Tucker, your plant will close” – and combined that with personal threats and blackmail against dissidents to cut into the delegates pledged to him. Tucker ended up with 5.34% of the Convention vote.

The Administration Caucus was able to skate through 18 more years before finally being challenged again at this year’s Convention. As an aside, we should add that Tucker and Kelly, both now retired, both backed Walkowicz’s candidacy this year.

1947-1970: The Workers Lose Ground to the Companies

The Administration Caucus has been the corporations’ most efficient weapon in imposing sacrifices, implicit or explicit, on auto workers, and through them on a big part of the rest of the working class.

During the Reuther years, from 1947-1970, even if the standard of living of auto workers slowly improved, and a certain number of social benefits – like pensions and health care – were gained in the contracts, overall, auto workers fell further behind relative to the enormous increase in wealth their labor produced for the auto companies. Most of the benefits from the steadily increasing productivity went to the U.S. auto companies. From 1946 through 1969, wages and other labor costs may have increased by 25%; but profits were up 77%, dividends up 60% and executive income up 80%. Ford, General Motors and, to a lesser extent, even Chrysler used the gains from worker productivity to buy up other companies, fully establish their own financial companies and spread their tentacles around the world.

The Reuther apparatus, which was nationally centralized, was able to push through contract after contract on a workforce that was atomized, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, scattered over a thousand workplaces. But workers registered their anger at the speed-up and the contracts by closing down their own plants with wildcats. In 1961, as a new contract was being pushed through, every GM plant was hit by at least one wildcat that closed it down, as were many Ford plants. Worker anger, unable to touch the Administration Caucus running the

national union, focused on local officials. In 1961 and again in 1963, according to Martin Glaberman, one third of all local presidents were voted out of office.

The biggest open attack on the workers' standard of living during the Reuther years came in 1967. In the face of rapidly rising inflation, the auto companies wanted to get rid of the cost-of-living clause in the auto contracts. Faced with resistance from the ranks, Reuther took Ford workers out on a strike that lasted 48 days – wearing them down, ending with a contract that effectively eliminated the COLA by putting severe limits on it.

1970-1978: Attacks on Worker Militancy

In the post-Reuther years, which coincided with the slide of the U.S. economy into a decades-long stagnation and economic decline that has only gotten progressively worse, the Administration Caucus apparatus worked to impose more open sacrifices on the auto workers, pumping up profits for the auto companies.

At the beginning, as the companies toughened their stance, the Administration Caucus moved to break the auto workers' reliance on wildcat strikes, which had been a regular feature of life in the auto plants all during the 1960s and early '70s. In 1970, a series of wildcats hit Chrysler's Eldon Axle plant, first in defense of a fired worker, then in defense of 12 stewards who had led the first wildcat, then in reaction to several brutal deaths in the plant. Not only did the Administration Caucus leaders refuse to back elected union officials fired by Chrysler – they actively used union resources to prevent Jordan Sims, the committeeman fired after the third walk-out, from being re-elected. But the most notable attack by the Administration Caucus came in the summer of 1973, a year in which the plants simmered with wildcats. The top union apparatus sent a 1000-member goon squad, fully armed with baseball bats and iron pipes and with a few handguns ostentatiously in evidence, to attack picket lines and crush a wildcat strike that had shut down Chrysler's Mack Avenue Stamping plant. With the support of the International Union, Chrysler very publicly discharged 91 workers and disciplined over a hundred more, putting an end to the wave of wildcats that had simmered all summer long. The UAW leadership moved again the next year to break a wildcat strike that broke out at Dodge Truck in support of a fired steward and several other activists. The centerpiece of that action was the "mobile court," an open collaboration between the union and the state apparatus. A union official drove a flat-bed truck, from which a circuit court judge ordered the immediate arrest of any picketer who didn't move away from the gates. And union officials pointed out the fired steward, whom the judge denounced and ordered arrested. Then in 1976 came the GM Fleetwood strike, called originally by the shop committee after the president and another local officer were fired. After a two-day shut-down, the Administration Caucus sent regional and international reps to control each plant gate. With weapons in evidence, they threatened violence to all those who didn't go in, helping to end the strike. Almost 500 workers were given some kind of discipline for that strike, including 10 permanent discharges, in a deal cut by the International.

Anger by the ranks, who again could not touch the top leaders sitting in Solidarity House, focused on local officers. During 1978 and 1979, half of all incumbent local officers in Chrysler plants, for example, were thrown out in local elections.

1979: The Concessions Begin

By the time the "Big 3" auto companies began to demand outright concessions in 1979, the attack by the apparatus on the ranks had been reinforced by the first wave of unemployment

in 1974-75, and then by the vast increase in unemployment and plant closings during the severe 1979-81 recession.

The Administration Caucus leaders openly pushed the concessions, arguing that workers at Chrysler had to sacrifice to save “their” company, and then that workers at Ford and GM must sacrifice also – to keep “their” companies competitive with Chrysler! And, just like 2009, the federal government extorted those concessions. Democratic President Jimmy Carter threatened he would let Chrysler, with all its jobs, fall into bankruptcy unless workers agreed to the concessions.

This period also saw the development of open “whipsawing,” which started at Ford but took particularly virulent form at GM, loaded down with many old factories made redundant by the ever-increasing productivity squeezed out of its work force. Workers at one plant were pitted against another by union officials who advised them that the only way to keep “their” plant open was to give the company what it wanted – and what it wanted was an end to work rules that impeded the companies’ push for greater productivity, productivity which led to even more plant closings.

In 1982, when Chrysler workers voted down a contract pushed by the Administration Caucus, the Caucus came back and pushed a re-vote on the Chrysler workers, this time accompanied by threats that workers who voted “no” would find their plants closed. Workers fought back, mocking the procedure as a demand to “vote, and vote again until you get it right.” But ultimately enough arms were twisted, enough threats about plant closings made, that the workers did “get it right,” giving the union apparatus the “yes” vote it demanded.

There were a few exceptions. Workers in some of GM’s Pontiac and Flint plants refused to ratify local contracts being pushed in a “whipsawing” campaign. In 1987, workers at Blue Cross carried out a 12-week long strike. The Administration Caucus Apparatus openly attacked workers who were attempting to organize their strike to strengthen it, to get out information to the ranks. But, after 12 weeks on strike, Blue Cross workers were able to back off the company – and the Administration Caucus apparatus.

But overall, UAW workers succumbed to the demands for concessions, which contributed to the enormous increase in company profits from 1990 to 2004 – profits which were not reinvested in the auto industry, but were drained away into the financial circuits.

Concessions – Part Two

The new round of concessions from 2005 up to today was carried out in much the same way as the earlier ones, with the union heads carrying the ball for the companies, and with the Democratic Party administration of Barack Obama intervening as Carter had to extort the concessions.

But the impact of these new concessions is vastly greater. King himself admitted that current workers have already lost from \$7,000 to \$30,000 each, due to the concessions taken since 2005. Scheduled wage increases, bonuses and cost-of living were eliminated; medical coverage was scaled back. And that doesn’t tell the half of it. A vast number of concessions in working conditions has reinforced the killing speed-up: ranging from the reduction of break time and vacation time; to work hours that include rotating crews or working 10-hour days on the line; to the requirement that laid-off workers must move anywhere in the country to keep their seniority intact; to the consolidation of skilled trades classifications and requiring that they work 12 hour days. And the right to strike on economic issues was given away until 2015 at GM and Chrysler.

In the midst of a recession, the worst since the Great Depression, with auto sales at a low level, the auto companies are today making profits. This boom-or-bust industry – which traditionally made lots of money in the good years and lost money in the bad ones – is today making money in a bad year. And those profits attest to how much has been stolen by concessions from the workers' paychecks, and how much more productivity has been squeezed out of their hides.

But the worst is yet to come. The dumping of retiree medical care into a severely underfunded union-run VEBA eliminates company responsibility for workers as soon as their working lives are used up. The two-tier wage and benefit packages – aimed at the generation of workers now being hired into the factories – will cut the standard of living of auto workers in half. These two concessions taken together are expected to lower total labor costs by much more than half, to the great benefit of the wealthy class that owns not only the companies, but also the banks standing behind them.

Ford Workers Loosen the Grip of the Administration Caucus

It's in the context of this long history of concessions, and against this bitter history of control by the Administration Caucus apparatus, that the NO-vote took place at Ford last October.

It was actually not the first time that a majority of workers had voted against a national contract. In 1982, Chrysler workers had voted "No," but had then been bludgeoned into ratifying the contract in a re-vote. And, almost certainly, other national contracts, though officially "ratified," had in fact been rejected by a majority of the workers, who had no means to verify the count announced by the International apparatus. For example, the 2005 vote recorded at Ford (officially, 51% Yes to 49% No) and the 2007 vote at Chrysler (54% to 46%) were particularly suspicious.

But in 2009, for the first time ever, not only did workers reject a national contract pushed by the union leadership, but they forced the apparatus to recognize that rejection. Ford workers opposed the concessions so demonstratively and so publicly that the union apparatus clearly felt it couldn't come back to force a re-vote.

Ford workers found the way in 2009 to link with each other, from plant to plant, and get the information around. They found the way to record the votes from every plant, making a complete and public tally of those votes as they came in. And they showed themselves able to confront the apparatus when it sent hundreds of staff people into the plants to threaten the workers. The top leaders, Gettelfinger and King, were treated to the rude reception they deserved when they came into some plants, trying to extort a "yes" vote.

Ford workers found the way, in their organizing against the concessions, to loosen the decades-long grip of the Administration Caucus on the rank and file.

The 2010 UAW Convention – A Union in Crisis

The Administration Caucus came into the 2010 Constitutional Convention with its long record of pushing concessions on the ranks. And the ranks of the union had clearly been expressing their disapproval of the policies pushed by the Administration Caucus, marked by the close votes in 2005, 2007 and the 2009 rejection at Ford.

There was no point on the Convention agenda where these questions could be discussed.

Nor was there any point on the agenda devoted to a discussion of the situation facing the union itself. "*You would never know this is a union in crisis,*" said one delegate to the press on

the first day of the Convention.

But crisis it is: the ranks of the union itself have been cut from 576,000 to 344,000, just since the last Convention in 2006. The UAW has lost over three-quarters of the members it had in 1979 – its high point, with 1,528,000 members, just before the drive for concessions began. That enormous membership loss reflects two trends that have beset auto workers and most other workers. First, jobs were rapidly lost as the result of increasing productivity, accepted and justified by the UAW leadership. Second, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost when the three Detroit auto companies outsourced work to low-wage companies. Despite the union's propaganda, trying to obscure the issue, most of those low-paying outsourced jobs are in this country, not overseas.

The whole convention was hamstrung by its usual, very formal parliamentary-style procedure that serves the apparatus well in stifling discussion.

Many locals had submitted resolutions for discussion at the convention. Some, fed up with the Caucus stranglehold, focused on the way officers are chosen or the way contracts are negotiated and ratified. Some focused on the way the union's policies have helped lower the standard of living of auto workers or of retirees. Retiree chapters submitted resolutions asking that retirees be given a vote on contracts that change their pension or medical care.

Not a single resolution taking up such issues was put on the agenda for discussion. Overall, 126 resolutions were simply ignored. And to make sure they didn't get called out, the National Steering Committee of the Administration Caucus distributed a "request" that all delegates vote against any proposal to bring a resolution out of committee, and vote against any proposal to modify the convention rules, and vote against any proposal to modify the agenda.

In addition there were uncounted resolutions concerning the attacks on the workers' standard of living. Every one of them was sidetracked, "referred" to the Bargaining Convention, which won't take place for another year!

In general, local elections for convention delegates are the least noted by the ranks – and thus delegates often are *de facto* picked by the apparatus of the locals and beholden to it. But even many of these delegates were uneasy with the way the Convention unfolded.

The one way many of them found to express their collective unease was to oppose the top officers' proposal to increase their own pay. Just like the big bosses at the auto companies, who rewarded themselves while cutting the workers' wages, UAW top leaders felt no qualms about pushing through another pay increase for themselves – eight to nine thousand dollars more than their base rate set four years ago. Ignoring the apparatus for once, about a quarter of the delegates voted "No" to the proposed increase.

Despite all the problems facing the rank and file and the union itself, this Convention was organized to be just business as usual. And it would have been – except for the fact that someone contested against the Administration Caucus pick for president, thereby putting some of the real issues out there.

In her speech nominating Walkowicz, delegate Cathy Abney declared: "*We [at the Dearborn Truck Plant] did not agree to peacefully giving up what our grandparents and parents fought for! We voted 92% in 2005 and 93% in 2009 against concessions, which included a no-strike clause for four years. Giving up our right to strike for one minute was not an option.... Our union faces a huge crisis, a real emergency, brought on by past policies. We need to do a radical 180-degree turn. Turn away from concessions! We need to turn to policies that put the workers' interests first, fighting policies! ... The Rouge site is where the Battle of the Overpass was fought in 1937. The workers at DTP today refer to the overpass, still standing, as the*

Bridge. And today, the workers in the plants are saying, 'It's time to go back to the bridge.'"

Yes, today's workers need to "go back to the bridge," to prepare to fight.

But that's exactly what this Convention declared itself against, symbolically and practically, when it continued to reduce the funds available to support strikes. Dues money has long formally been divided three ways: 38% for the local union, 32% for the international union and 30% for the strike fund. But through a complicated series of "temporary" rebates, begun seven conventions ago in 1983, part of the dues scheduled for the strike fund has been rebated to the locals, and part handed over to the International. Over time, the strike fund got a smaller and smaller share – "temporarily." Starting with the 2006 Convention, only 5% of every dues dollar ends up in the strike fund. And since that same Convention, not a penny of the money earned by the fund's holdings has gone to the fund.

In addition to diverting money scheduled to pay into the strike fund, the Administration Caucus also proposed, over the last 15 years, to take out money already in the fund: the 1995 Convention took 50 million dollars; 2002 Convention, 75 million; 2006 Convention, 110 million; and the recent convention, 160 million. That totals 395 million dollars drained directly out of the strike fund, handed over to the International for its running expenses, which include, among other things, the salaries of top officials, or the parties thrown for delegates at the convention, or contributions from CAP to back some politician!

If the strike fund were to fall below 500 million dollars, the rebates would stop. But, of course, since the Administration Caucus over the last four decades has "authorized" very few strikes, the fund has never fallen that low.

It might seem that 500 million is a lot – but a 10-week strike at GM alone, for example, would drain about half that fund. A proposal made by one local this year to raise the basic amount for the strike fund up to 650 million didn't see the light of day on the convention floor.

The apparatus couldn't have made it more obvious: they intend to make no fight.

In Conclusion

When answering a media question about the Walkowicz candidacy, Gregg Shotwell, one of the leaders of the fight against concessions at GM and then Delphi had this to say: *"Gary's audience won't be the hundreds of UAW delegates in an air-conditioned Cobo Center. It will be the more than 100,000 active hourly workers on Detroit 3 factory floors. He's really out to build resistance to further concessions during next year's master contract negotiations."*

Walkowicz himself, in a statement issued to supporters after the Convention, declared: *"the most important thing was not the outcome of this election. The most important thing is what we as UAW workers are ready to do in 2011 when our contract expires.... Listening to Bob King and the other top UAW leaders during and after the Convention, it seems clear to me that they plan on following the same policies of recent years – putting the interests of the corporations in front of our interests. If we are going to change around our union, if we are going to get what we deserve next year, it is going to be up to us. All those workers who are ready to stand up, just like the Ford and Delphi workers stood up. It's time to get ready."*

There is no road for workers, other than depending on their own forces. And the experience that Ford workers went through, standing up to company threats, can serve the Ford workers and others in the fights they will have to make. When Ford workers for the first time in UAW history made their NO vote respected, they shook the hold of the Administration Caucus on the functioning of the union. And that can open a door through which other workers can pass.

In recent months, a number of workers have turned down extortion threats made by the

companies and reinforced by the top union apparatus: a New Process Gear plant in New York state, several former Delphi plants, a GM plant in Indianapolis. They have been joined by other workers in the Southeast Michigan area who refused to cave in to employer demands: City of Detroit workers, Wayne County workers, State of Michigan workers. If what started at Ford continues to spread, this can quickly change the atmosphere, not only inside the UAW, but for the working class in general.

In any case, only through their own struggles can workers have any hope not only to defend themselves but to put their hands on the wealth they themselves produce.

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