

Bob King's "Bold New Strategies" – Just the Same Tired Old Excuses

Since Bob King took office as new president of the UAW last June, the press has generally portrayed him as a union leader trying to find innovative ways to confront old, intractable problems, particularly the near-catastrophic loss of UAW membership – which today is less than one-fourth of what it was in 1979, the high point.

King himself has been very careful not to separate himself out from the leadership that came before, and in fact emphasizes that it was under that leadership that the UAW has learned from its mistakes and begun to *“embrace fundamental, radical change.”*

Nonetheless, King has also made a point to emphasize, as he did in an August speech to a Center for Automotive Research Conference, that *“this is a new world, and we must reinvent our union with bold new strategies.”*

So, the question is, what are the “bold new strategies,” and above all, whose interests will be served by this “reinvented” union?

“Increasing Activism”

What's most obvious is that King has pushed to “energize” the union, calling on it – or at least its staff and apparatus and some union activists – to take to the streets to demonstrate. At the June Constitutional Convention, King proposed a program he called “GIMME 5,” whose aim, according to the UAW's website, was *“to increase activism, mobilize for collective action and build capacity to fight for Social Justice.”* And to emphasize the point, King stepped out to lead delegates at the end of the Convention in a demonstration to the offices of the big banks in downtown Detroit, protesting their role in the worsening situation for the population. Two days after the Convention ended, the UAW took part in the week-long U.S. Social Forum, a national gathering held in Detroit this time, attended by community groups, peace activists, environmentalists, left organizations and several other unions. The UAW sponsored seven different forums or activities.

Since that time, the UAW has joined Jesse Jackson of the Rainbow Push organization in preparing several larger demonstrations under the slogan, “Jobs, Justice and Peace”: one in Detroit in late August, one in Washington D.C. in early October. On September 1, UAW activists demonstrated at UPS facilities in Detroit, Chicago and Louisville, Kentucky, protesting the company's vicious treatment of unionists in Turkey. There were several demonstrations called against JPMorgan Chase Bank over mortgage foreclosures and, through the bank, against RJReynolds Tobacco Company over its refusal to recognize a union for laborers on tobacco farms. King led a three-day caravan to the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia for a protest against U.S. military support to dictatorial regimes. On December 7, the UAW took several hundred activists to the Hyundai-Kia Technical Center in Michigan in support of striking temporary workers in South Korea. UAW locals in various parts of the country organized several dozen demonstrations at Toyota dealerships, denouncing Toyota's hostility to unions and its closure of the NUMMI facility in California.

Up until now, these demonstrations have involved few UAW members outside the staffers and the officials, representatives and a few activists from local unions. However, King recently said that the leadership was going to call on every member to give two hours a week for demonstrating or similar activities. In any case, at the very least, the press has given this activity coverage, causing some of the demonstrations to be noted in the work places, and certainly noted by those more active in the union, contributing to a vague hope that the union under King could

change from its moribund state of the last years.

King has explained this activity in part by saying the UAW needs to go back to its roots of “social activism,” referring to the “social unionism” of Walter Reuther, while pointing out that the UAW needs allies if it is to “restore its power.”

The situation, he says, requires it. Several times, in important speeches, he has laid out his reasoning – most particularly speeches in August and January to auto industry executives and analysts, and a January speech to the union’s Community Action (CAP) Conference. King says that although the large sacrifices made by UAW members have enabled the Detroit 3 auto companies to escape their 2008-09 brush with death, and although those companies have now recovered their health, nonetheless the union cannot recover the sacrifices workers made because over half the auto industry remains non-union. And he dares to say this even after the companies themselves admit they are making money hand over fist and putting billions into their reserves! No, King concludes that the only thing the UAW can focus on is organizing the “transplants” or what King sometimes calls the “transnationals,” that is, the plants built in this country by Toyota, Honda, Hyundai, etc. He emphasized this point at the CAP Conference, saying, *“If we don’t organize these transnationals, I don’t think there is a long-term future for the UAW.”*

“A Smart Business Decision”

King’s UAW has let it be known that it has a “new strategy” for organizing, an “innovative” way to do what the UAW has been unable to do up until now: succeed in organizing the transplants. The UAW announced in early January that it would call on non-union employers to respect the democratic rights of their workers. Concretely, it offered its own “Principles for Fair Union Elections.”

King was not proposing that the UAW call on workers in the transplants to make a fight. He was not proposing the UAW make a fight itself. He was simply asking the companies – politely – to accept the UAW. But why should companies, which have successfully opposed unionization in their plants, do that?

King tries to convince the companies that it would serve their own interests to accept the union. In his January speech to the Automotive News World Congress, King explained it this way: *“Working with the UAW is a smart business decision. Every day in every way, the UAW is dedicated to doing whatever it takes to help our employers through innovation, flexibility, continuous cost-saving, quality and productivity. With our unionized employers, we have created a culture of trust, teamwork and openness. We have completely discarded the outdated remnants of the ‘us versus them’ mentality that resulted in rigid work rules and narrow job classifications.”*

Elsewhere in the same speech, King literally brags about the “positive impact” the UAW has had “working with our UAW-represented employers” to enforce the highest rates for attendance and increased productivity in the industry – another way to say grinding down the workers.

King is offering the union’s services to the transnationals to help them increase their profits in the only way that companies have historically increased their rate of profit – by reducing as much as possible the share that labor gets from the value it produces. In the Detroit 3, that has led to cutting the wage bill in its broadest sense: not only pushing productivity by getting rid of work rule protections and just outright speed-up – forcing fewer workers to put out more work – but also by cutting actual wages and benefits.

The UAW’s sudden shift in its long-time opposition to free trade was probably aimed at demonstrating just how helpful the union could be. Surprising even its allies in the union

movement – not to mention the UAW membership – the UAW recently threw its support to the U.S.-Korean trade agreement. Whatever else was involved, this certainly signaled the “transnational” companies that the UAW leadership would take their interests as the union’s own.

But what if the “transnational” companies aren’t convinced they need the UAW? Then King promises that the UAW “*will launch a global campaign to brand that company as a human rights violator.*”

What a threat!

What about the Workers at the Transplants?

King barely speaks to what might motivate transplant workers to organize a union, except in the most general “historical” terms. The following section of one of his January speeches is typical: “*Unions are the sole vehicle throughout history by which working people have gained a voice on the job and a decent standard of living. Just as the UAW once helped to build the American middle class, the UAW will now work to build a global middle class.*”

Whatever “history” shows about how working people have stood up for themselves, recent history shows that the UAW leadership has carried out an open policy of helping the corporations lower the standard of living of labor. And King himself acknowledged it, for example, in his August speech to the industry: “*UAW members took wage cuts of \$7,000 to \$30,000 a year. Benefits were also reduced significantly. Restructuring resulted in the loss of nearly 200,000 jobs.*” The UAW at the time of the concessions, and King still today, justify that sacrifice with the claim that everyone had to sacrifice to help the companies emerge from the crisis.

The fact is, not everyone was called on to sacrifice – only the workers. The companies, their executives and their banks are doing just fine where they’re at, thank you.

How could this attract an enthusiastic response for the UAW from workers at the transplants?

Up until now, the transplants have indirectly used the UAW’s class collaboration to help them reduce their own wage bill. When the UAW pushed through a permanent two-tier wage for all new hires, Honda rushed to announce that in the new plant it was opening, it would match the lower rates the UAW had agreed to “up North.” And more is certainly coming. As that second-tier wage spreads widely through the UAW plants with retirement and replacement hiring, the wage bill of the Detroit 3 companies will be significantly lower than that of the transplants – giving the transplants the pretext to cut wages for their own labor force. The very thing that King brags about – that the UAW has sacrificed the standard of living of GM, Ford and Chrysler workers to “rescue” their employers – lays the groundwork for a further, steeper race to the bottom.

How would this go over with the workers at the transplants?

And when the UAW brags that it has helped to push greater productivity, greater discipline, stricter attendance – all those things that have made working conditions in the plants worse – what kind of encouragement is this for workers to join the union?

Of course, it’s not ruled out that one of the transplant companies could take up the UAW’s offer, regardless of what the workers there think – especially if the companies begin to face more discontent from their workers.

But if this should happen, this “new UAW” will not serve the interests of the workers at the transplants, any more than it has served the workers at the Detroit 3.

A decision by the bosses to accept the UAW would not stop the downward spiral. Ford workers certainly remember that King pushed them in 2009 to give up the same concessions as those wrung by “bankruptcy” from GM and Chrysler workers in order to preserve “the pattern.”

The Union WON'T Demand the Increases the Workers Deserve

In January, King explained to local union officials and CAP activists that helping to organize the transplants will serve the interests of workers already organized: *“If we win the transplants, that’s going to help every single member of the UAW. There is no more symbolic victory to win than the victory of the transplants. One reason to win representation with the transplants is it will help state workers, it will help insurance workers, it will help everybody in the UAW and will say, ‘We are back, we are fighting and we’ve got strategies that will work.’”*

What a beautiful future King portrays – but it’s a delaying tactic, a way to tell the unionized workers they can’t fight today because the others aren’t yet unionized.

Elsewhere in the speech, King said it more clearly: *“Here’s the terrible position we’re in in autos. Because we’ve fallen so far in the percent of workers represented by the UAW in auto, the union can’t demand the increases the workers deserve. If we go and dramatically raise fixed costs for Ford, General Motors or Chrysler, we’re shooting ourselves in the foot.”*

In other words, the employers are in competition with each other and the workers all have to help “their own” employer win the competition. This idea certainly didn’t start with King – it’s an old, old idea pushed by UAW bureaucrats who didn’t want to lead a fight that would cut into the profits of “their” companies. And this view that workers must cooperate with their boss for the bosses’ benefit in order to have a job is hardly a new idea for the workers at the transplants: it’s the paternalism the transplants have pushed ever since they set up shop in the South.

Yes, the bosses are in a competition with each other to maximize their profits. And yes, they try to set the workers in competition with each other in order to have a freer hand to do what they want. And, yes, the more workers who are banded together, the stronger they can be. But having more workers adopt the interests of their own bosses can only divide the working class. Being in the same union won’t stop the bosses from playing the competition game so long as that union accepts the idea that the workers and their bosses share a common interest.

Finally, when King pretends that the union can’t “demand the increases the workers deserve” today because the UAW first has to get others to join – that puts the whole problem squarely upside down.

UAW bureaucrats love to claim the heritage of Flint as their own. King himself does it regularly in order to say that the UAW will fight once again – in the future. But King, like the others, rewrites the story of how Flint was organized. (By the way, Reuther, who King takes as his godfather, opposed the strike at Flint as “too risky,” premature.)

Those militants who did organize the Flint sit-downs did not believe that workers at Flint had to wait to strike since there weren’t yet enough who had joined the union. In fact, the relative strength of the unionized numbers then was much weaker than today. There were only a few hundred auto workers total who had joined the auto union – out of the hundreds of thousands employed in the industry. But when the activists at Flint began their fight, they pulled those others after them. It was through their struggles and others like theirs that the union was built up.

From the standpoint of organizing the transplants, the best thing the UAW could do would be to fight to get back what has been given up to the Detroit 3 auto companies, to provide an example that workers don’t have to passively accept it when the companies try to make them compete with each other to lower their wages. Organize against the speed-up – which is as killing in the Northern plants as in the Southern ones. Organize against the layoffs – which are created by the push for productivity, the change in work rules, etc. Organize to eliminate those wage differentials – those two and three and four tiers – that not only threaten the unity of the workers, but are also destroying the well-being of the next generation of workers.

That might not attract the transplant bosses. But it could attract the workers at the transplants to join with UAW workers making the same kind of fight everyone needs to make, against bosses who are attacking everyone in the same ways.

Staring September 15 in the Face

This is exactly the crux of the problem: King is NOT proposing that workers at GM, Ford and Chrysler fight today. He's arguing against it. In an editorial King wrote for the July-August edition of *Solidarity* magazine, he made this clear: *"I know that everybody wants back the concessions that we've lost. But let's be honest and let's be real leaders. We're not going to get that back by just saying 'no' to the bosses. The way we're going to get it back is by developing and then implementing comprehensive strategies that rebuild the power of the UAW by giving workers the right to organize."*

In other words, to the workers at GM, Ford and Chrysler, fed up with years of concessions, who believe it's well past time to get back what they gave up in the contract of 2003, the re-opener of 2005, the concession-filled contract of 2007, and the new re-opener in 2009, King has this to say: Not yet, not this year – the UAW first has to implement "comprehensive strategies," and that takes time. You'll have to wait....

In reality, calling on workers to wait for better times is not a "new strategy" for the UAW, it's only the same tired old excuse used to push through years of concessions. The fact that it's being used today by King, who is making a name for himself organizing demonstrations, changes nothing.

Obviously, demonstrating against predatory banks and anti-union companies is fine – unions should do that. But it would be even better to be demonstrating against a predatory GM, Ford and Chrysler – IF those demonstrations were one of the actions used to prepare workers to fight to take back the concessions they have given up.

Otherwise, demonstrations are little more than play-acting, useful for diverting the workers' attention from the contract coming up, but not for engaging the workers in a fight to improve their situation.

In any case, all this "new strategy" and all the play-acting testify to the fear of the auto companies and the UAW apparatus itself of what the workers might do this coming September. King himself certainly has not forgotten what happened in the fall of 2009 when he tried to force one more round of concessions down the workers' throats – he was roundly booed out of the meetings at two Ford plants where he dared to show his face. And the overwhelming NO vote at that time not only was a slap in King's face, it testified to the workers' unwillingness to cave in, even when facing more threats of plants closing.

Will that sentiment carry over to this fall? No one can say. But the fights we've seen at GM's Indianapolis Metal Fab and at Lake Orion Assembly plants testify to the fact that there are workers who have reached the point of saying, threaten us all you want, we're not buying it any more.

Already the UAW apparatus has begun to float the idea that "profit-sharing" could be a way to go this year – combined, perhaps, with a seat on the companies' boards. And the Detroit 3 companies are doing their best to help the UAW's waiting game. They announced they are giving profit-sharing checks this year, larger checks than they are contractually required to give. Supposedly, this is to show the companies' gratitude for the sacrifices the workers have made, and to hint that more could be coming in the future if only the workers would ... wait. Even Chrysler, which pretends not to be profitable overall, says it will give a token \$750 check.

But those checks don't begin to match what was given up. They are essentially a way to

foster foolish hopes, diverting workers from what they need to do.

In any case, King is right in one respect, when he says that workers won't get the concessions back by just saying "No." Saying "No" may throw back new concession demands – and even that is not so sure in the current climate. But to get what they want, workers at Ford, GM and Chrysler will have to take things in their own hands.

King has already warned workers: the UAW leadership is not going to organize a fight that will touch the bosses' profits. But that's what needs to be done. If workers don't want to be put in the position this September of having no choice but to accept the bosses' leftovers that King will push them to accept, then they have to start now to prepare their own fight.

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