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The United Auto Workers Must Fight Back! The African World By Bill Fletcher, Jr. BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor

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When I awoke on Friday morning, December 12th, I turned on my computer. The first thing I saw was that the deal being worked on in the Senate to provide the automobile companies with loans had fallen through. The explanation offered on MSN: the United Auto Workers (UAW) refused to take a pay cut.

I found myself furious about the situation. Let us be clear that the deal did **not** fall through because the UAW had refused a pay cut. The deal fell through because the Republicans, who had consistently opposed the loan effort, seek to drive the auto companies into bankruptcy so that they can destroy the UAW. Those leading the charge against the proposed loan (which has been misnamed a "bailout") publicly seek to force the UAW to accept the same wage rate as the *non-union* (foreign) auto facilities which, by coincidence, are located in many of the states of these Republican Senators.

This situation is filled with irony. The UAW, a once proud union that played a major role in elevating Black (and other) auto workers out of poverty, has been in a fairly consistent retreat since the early 1980s. At that time the leadership of the UAW chose to engage in what they saw as a partnership or "jointness" with the auto company owners. As such, the UAW offered concession after concession to the auto companies, infuriating much of their own membership, but justified by the leadership as helping the companies to stay afloat. In fact, in the most recent collective bargaining agreement

signed by the UAW with the Big Three, there was a MAJOR concession offered (and accepted) which resulted in a two-tier situation. Two tier means that new employees would not receive the same wages and benefits of current employees. Again, this was done in the name of saving jobs and saving the companies, but it further weakened the UAW in the eyes of many of its own members and many of its friends.

For the right-wing Republicans, these concessions were not good enough. It was not good enough that the UAW had been virtually brought to their knees. The Republicans wanted the UAW on all fours, kissing the ground. This is what was at stake in their undermining a loan deal in Congress. The UAW leadership obviously concluded that they had retreated as far as they were going to retreat, at least for the moment, and that they were not going to accept further humiliations.

The contrast in the treatment of the auto companies with the Wall Street bailout has been elaborated upon by countless writers. It is the height of hypocrisy. Whereas Wall Street was asked for NO plans; was not asked to cut any salaries; and was given funds outright with NO significant public oversight, the exact opposite was the case with the auto loans.

It is no exaggeration that an auto collapse will have a dramatic impact on the already dire economic situation we are experiencing, a crisis that may be evolving from a recession into a depression. Many other industries depend on the auto industry, so it is not just auto jobs that are at stake. In addition, this will mean an increase in job loss for African Americans, already a population which has suffered ***disproportionately*** as a result of the millions of jobs lost in manufacturing over the recent period.

I unapologetically believe that the auto companies need to get the interim loans with public oversight. I also believe that more needs to be done: the US auto industry needs to be nationalized. I do not think that the auto companies' leaderships have the capability and vision to build the sort of new industries that the USA so desperately needs. Not only do we need the production of higher performance, fuel efficient automobiles, we actually need fewer automobiles. We need light-rail vehicles; new inter-city transportation; and greater experiments in hydrogen power. This needs to be directed by the federal government as part of what I would suggest is a national economic AND environmental emergency.

That said, the fight for the immediate survival of the auto companies should be a battle that the UAW itself is conducting publicly, loudly and militantly. Frankly, I do not see it unfolding at the moment and I am a bit mystified. The UAW leadership seems to have gone out of its way to operate under the cape of the auto companies rather than staking out any independent turf of its own. Worse, when UAW President Ron Gettelfinger has been publicly asked about the mismanagement of the auto companies - a softball question that should have been knocked out of the park - he walks around the answer. Instead of pointing out the shortsightedness of the auto owners in the cars they have built, their approach to emission standards and fuel consumption, Gettelfinger has done dances that would put a smile on the face of the late Gregory Hines.

On top of all of this, the UAW, which remains an important and large union, has done little to mobilize its members into the streets to make their case. The only face we see

is that of Gettelfinger, and particularly for those of us of color, unless you have an auto worker in your family, you could forget that a substantial proportion of the auto workforce is African American and Latino!

The lack of UAW visibility and militancy weakens their case. Instead of being an independent force and voice for the auto workers, they have ended up looking more like a lobby for the auto companies. None of this, however, should take away from the fact that the loans need to be instituted and that serious consideration should be given by the incoming Obama administration to nationalization.

I just want to see the UAW make plain THEIR case and touch the hearts of people of the USA who are completely fed up with Wall Street, the Bush administration, and the cavalier antics of corporate America. The UAW has allies across this country if they - the UAW - are prepared to throw down.

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