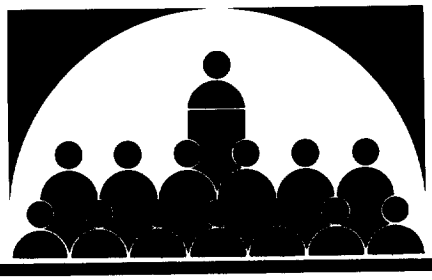
# Convention report



## United Auto Workers 29th constitutional convention

Henry P. Guzda

Democracy—economic, social, and political—was the dominant theme of the 29th constitutional convention of the United Auto Workers (UAW). It was a gathering that could have been confrontational and divisive, particularly because of a well-organized and growing dissident faction within the union. Yet, when the proceedings ended, it was clear that the philosophy of the majority prevailed, while the rights of the dissidents were honored and their protests heard. In addition, the delegates passed a host of resolutions pledging to support trade unionism and solidarity on a global scale, and to organize foreign-owned auto production facilities in the United States. The attendees also pondered the future of the trade union movement, while remembering the struggles for economic and social justice that have continued for more than 50 years.

### New directions or old?

Observers of auto industry labor relations have noted the emergence of dissidence in the UAW over the past decade. A group calling themselves the "New Directions" movement and led by Jerry Tucker, director of region 5, argue that the union's leaders have coopted members' rights by cooperating with employers in joint labor-management programs. They contend that auto manufacturers have used joint programs (for example, team concept production and Japanese style management) to erode seniority provisions, reduce wage rates, and jeopardize other collective bargaining benefits by pitting local unions against each other during contract negotiations and in plant closing situations—a process they call "whipsawing." New Directions members, paradoxically, want union leaders to abandon labor-management cooperation and revert to the philosophy of adversarial labor-management relations prevalent in the postwar era of the 1950's. New Directions candidates have challenged incumbent leaders for local and national offices, and have even used the judicial process to win some contested elections.

Proponents of New Directions and the incumbent UAW leaders have debated the philosophy of the union. Donald Douglas, president of local 594 in Pontiac, MI, claims "the whipsawing is just tearing us [the UAW] apart and eroding our solidarity." UAW president Owen Bieber, however, contends that "critics insult the intelligence of UAW members by suggesting that participation in joint programs will compromise or contaminate the values of union workers or subvert the union's independence." He further explained, "just because we use the vehicle of joint activities to pursue some of our objectives, does not mean that we plan to surrender any of the other tools and resources that are available to help us achieve our goals."

Bieber took issue with charges that the union's executive leadership failed to protect worker rights and challenge antiunion onslaughts in a corporate "age of greed." He retorted that the UAW authorized 817 strikes over the past 3 years, and that 81,721 UAW members marched on picket lines. He reminded the delegates that at a time when many workers have suffered economic hardships, the UAW accomplished several goals, including:

- Job bank programs benefiting nearly 40,000 members and their families.
- Winning Trade Adjustment Assistance for 677,000 members.
- Obtaining $200 million in Job Training Partnership Act funds.
- Protection for more than 100,000 jobs through job security provisions in pattern-bargaining contracts.

Speeches from invited guests also reflected a commitment to new innovations in the workplace. California Attorney General John Van de Kamp focused on the industrial patterns of work at the New United Motors Manufacturing plant in Fremont, CA, where employee involvement has produced high quality products. Maine Senator George Mitchell spoke about new workplace partnerships and New York Governor Mario Cuomo echoed a similar theme.

Undaunted by such claims, New Direction's leaders attempted to challenge the incumbents through procedural means. But, on the convention's first day, they lost all appeals contesting the outcome of delegate elections. On the second day, they called for constitutional revision of the election process so that all top union officials, including 850 international representatives currently appointed by the incumbent president, would be elected by the rank-and-file. The dissidents argued that direct elections would make leaders more responsive to members' needs, while opponents claimed direct elections would allow interference from outside interests and encourage

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expensive election campaigns. A show-of-hands vote overwhelmingly upheld the delegate system. Following that loss, New Directions failed to generate support for a constitutional amendment prohibiting locals from bargaining supplemental concessionary contracts. Instead, the delegates upheld existing constitutional language prohibiting locals from bargaining substandard contracts.

The inability of the dissident faction to accomplish their goals was further reflected in union elections. President Bieber and his so-called "Bieber team" won all national offices in uncontested elections. This included William Casstevens (secretary–treasurer), Stephen Yokich, Odessa Komer, Ernest Lofton, Stan Marshall (vice presidents), and Tony DeJesus (trustee). Don Douglas, New Directions' candidate for director of the Detroit area—region 1–18, lost by a wide margin in his race against the administration-backed Bob Lent. Jerry Tucker lost the directorship of region 5, which includes several Southwestern States, to challenger Roy Wyse. Tucker had ascended to the director position by appealing the results of a 1986 election, and winning a Labor Department-administered election in 1987.

### International directions

While the concept of internal democracy dominated the proceedings, it was not the only item on the convention agenda. Global economics, with all the problems for organized labor (for example, substandard wage rates, multinational corporate structures, and antiunion governments), attracted considerable attention as well. Resolutions commending the progress and political victories of the Solidarnosc union in Poland and condemning the brutal repression of students and trade unionists in China passed without dissent. Guest speaker Antonia Hernandez, president of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, addressed the issue of Mexican labor migration to the United States and its implications for American trade unions. In a very emotional address and equally moving delegate ovation, Moses Mayekiso, general secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, thanked the UAW for its efforts leading to his release after 901 days in jail for trade union activities. The UAW and other American unions, he said, showed the apartheid regime in South Africa that there is international solidarity among unions in the free world.

Other speakers also focused on the effects of international trade and the globalization of trade unionism. Msgr. George Higgins, chairman of the UAW Public Review Board, commended the union's struggle for fair treatment of workers in countries which trade with the United States, and urged U.S. officials to act against antiunion repression by developing nations. House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt and New York Governor Mario Cuomo each discussed fair trade and the demands of the new global economy, addressing the issue of labor-management cooperation to meet international challenges.

The convention also promoted the expansion of domestic trade unionism. The delegates gave unanimous approval of resolutions to support the United Mine Workers union in their struggle against Pittston Coal Co. and workers striking against Eastern Air Lines. One resolution, calling for increased organizing activities by the UAW, cited the difficulties facing organizers despite recent successes at Mazda Motors, Diamond–Star (a joint venture of Chrysler and Mitsubishi), and Mack Trucks. Bieber warned the delegates that representation elections may not be successful on the first try, but the union would eventually succeed.

In reference to future organizing, the delegates passed a resolution supporting the union's report, *A Strong Union in a Changing World*, which comments on the changing workplace and UAW's reactions to those phenomena. The report covers a variety of topics such as changes in jobs and workplace design, changing industrial structures, political conditions, the union image, communications, organizing, education, training programs, and union empowerment.

### Social justice

The promotion of civil rights and social justice in society has been part of the UAW convention agenda dating to the administration of Walter Reuther in the 1940's. This convention featured Benjamin Hooks, president of the NAACP, Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy, Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. Hooks drew analogies to the 1937 Flint sitdown strikers and Rosa Parks sitting down to spark the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. Kennedy exalted the UAW for its vanguard role in the promotion of health care, civil rights, parental leave, and minimum wage issues. Jordan reminisced about the assistance she received from the union over the years in legislative struggles for civil rights. The delegates unanimously adopted a resolution calling for the elimination of "discrimination, racism, and sexism" in the United States.

### Employment security

Employment security has become a crucial negotiating point in auto worker contracts and has spilled over to other industries. The convention delegates paid particular attention to resolutions dealing with plant closings and labor law reform that specifically addressed employment problems. After a demonstration against plant closings by delegates from the UAW's Independents, Parts, and Suppliers division, a resolution was passed which encourages legislative action to protect workers against shutdowns and job losses; the resolution called for a 1-year advance notice before plant shutdowns and public input into shutdown decisions. Guest speaker Tom Donahue, AFL–CIO secretary-treasurer, noted that the UAW need not be reminded of plant relocations and job security. He congratulated the union for its organizing victory at Mack Trucks in South Carolina following the closing of Mack facilities in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Employment security, he added, meant wholesale revision of the National Labor Relations Act. The convention agreed, and passed a resolution calling for legislative enactment of a series of fundamental and procedural changes in labor law. The resolution contains lan-

guage specifically calling for prohibition of both lockouts and the hiring of replacement workers during disputes.

THE 29TH UNITED AUTO WORKERS convention was held June 18–23 in Anaheim, CA. Appropriately, it ended by marking a milestone in the careers of two UAW officials who served as catalysts of confrontation and change. The union honored retiring vice presidents Marc Stepp and Donald Ephlin. Stepp was a key figure in the implementation of modern operating agreements at Chrysler Corp. which call for many new workplace innovations (for example, team concept, pay for knowledge). Ephlin, head of the union's General Motors Department, avidly supported the promotion of labor-management cooperation and helped create many of the jointly administered programs (for instance, the GM-UAW Paid Educational Leave Program). Ephlin's vice presidency will be filled by Stephen Yokich, and Stan Marshall will succeed Stepp at Chrysler. Ernest Lofton will replace Yokich at Ford.

And, while preparing for the future, the convention delegates also made sure the past would not be forgotten. Delegates unanimously adopted a resolution authorizing the union to provide $3.4 million to construct the Leonard Woodcock Annex of the Reuther archives housed at Wayne State University. □

## Juggling jobs and school

While public and research interest in student work is relatively recent, student work itself is prevalent and has been for at least three decades. Growth in student work appears to have halted in recent years, and percentages of students employed are still below the peaks reached in the late 1970's. The percentages of female students working have risen more rapidly than the percentages of males working. The employment ratio has also risen for black female students. However, we should be concerned that the trend in working among black male high-school students has been declining steadily since 1964 (when information by race/ethnicity was first collected), particularly if this trend reflects a decline in opportunity for those who want part-time work or suggests an increase in alienation from the workplace. While the percent of black and Hispanic students working is low, there is little difference overall in the rate of student work in families with different levels of parent education, which is one measure of socioeconomic level.

—Paul E. Barton
*Earning and Learning: The Academic Achievement of High-School Juniors With Jobs*
(Princeton, NJ, Educational Testing Service, 1989), p. 13.