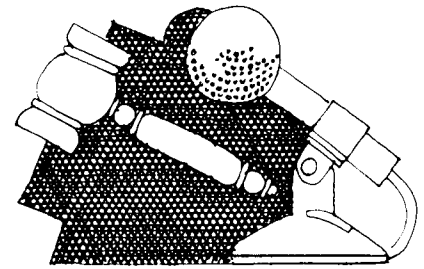


Conventions



Constitutional convention marks golden anniversary of the UAW

HENRY GUZDA

The United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) ended a 2-year celebration with the close of their 28th constitutional convention (UAW conventions are triennial), held June 1–6, in Anaheim, CA. It marked the culmination of the UAW's golden anniversary (1935–85), 50 years of social and economic progress. The celebratory theme, "We make our own history," was replete with allegories and accounts of the union's existence, highlighted by an episodic pictorial exhibit of that struggle: photos of the 1937 sit-down strike against General Motors; pictures on the beatings delivered to union organizers Walter Reuther and Richard Frankensteen in the infamous "Battle of the Overpass"; scenes of production lines manned by UAW-CIO members who helped to make the U.S. Army "go and grow" during World War II; and photos spanning a decade of activism by the UAW in the civil rights movement. Every guest speaker and union official invoked the name and memory of past heroes and events.

The union's stormy past reflected poignantly on an equally turbulent present. Thousands of auto industry jobs have shifted to foreign shores, and many American automakers have asked the union for further sacrifices in the form of collective bargaining concessions to remain competitive in a global economy. The new industrial relations system (a term to describe the current mode of cooperative labor-management relations vis-a-vis an adversarial one) has confused and upset some rank-and-file UAW members, provoking emotional debate among the 2,500 delegates over the union's survival strategy. Complicating these internal problems was the decision by all but one of the UAW Canadian locals to secede and form their own union, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW-Canada).

The convention climate, however, was upbeat and confident. Elected for a second consecutive 3-year term, UAW President Owen Bieber vowed to "go to war" to protect the union cause. While acknowledging the existence of internal union dissension caused by the tenor of troubled times, Bieber exclaimed that the "U" in UAW really does stand for

"United." Industrial cooperation in today's economic world, he added, is imperative but also a two-way street.

Fair trade, a key issue

High on the UAW list of convention priorities was the American trade imbalance and the erosion of our industrial base. The auto industry has lost 400,000 jobs to foreign competition since 1980, and the delegates place much of the blame on trade policies. The delegates supported several resolutions calling for a national industrial policy to increase our competitiveness with low wage standard nations and encourage productivity in the United States, including the general "Resolution on International Trade and Related Matters." This resolution supports domestic auto content legislation, recognition of unfair trade practices, trade adjustment assistance for U.S. workers displaced by foreign competition, affirmative Federal action to protect U.S. jobs, and penalties against nations which disregard worker rights.

The trade resolution also called on the Federal Government to protect the American industrial base. The shift in emphasis to service and information sector jobs—which organized labor views as low paying jobs—is detrimental to the U.S. economy, stated several delegates from the floor. The delegation also voiced support for H.R. 4800, a trade bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives and awaiting action by the U.S. Senate, that they believe will remedy some of the problems addressed at the convention.

Other convention speakers also focused on this theme. Senator Howard Metzenbaum, from a "rust belt" State with serious employment and trade problems, told the gathering that worker solidarity on a national industrial policy was imperative because nations with even lower wage rate structures than our current chief competitors are planning to export autos to the United States. Murray Finley, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, reminded the delegates that all of U.S. industry faces this problem, and Shiro Umemura, acting president of the Japanese Auto Workers, underscored the need for global worker solidarity. Bieber had previously educated the audience about current and future plans by Brazil, Yugoslavia, The People's Republic of China, and South Korea, all with auto worker wage rates under \$1 an hour, to export cars to the United States. Herman Rebhan, General Secretary of the International Metal Workers Federation—a body of auto worker and related trades organizations in the noncommunist world—discussed the lack of worker rights in these nations. The trade resolution calls for denial of favored-nation status to politics like Korea because of worker rights violations.

Henry Guzda is an industrial relations specialist with the Bureau of Labor Management Relations and Cooperative Programs, U.S. Department of Labor.

To complement the message delivered from the speakers' podium, the delegates held a spirited floor demonstration. Carrying placards calling for Federal support of plant closing legislation, protection against pension plan failures, and support of trade bill H.R. 4800, the delegates paraded around the convention floor while a speaker read out the names and locations of the participating locals: a litany of rust belt cities and towns. The demonstration was organized by the UAW's Industrial Parts Supplier Department, whose members have been deeply affected by the use of foreign parts in auto manufacturing. The resolution was vociferously adopted by the delegates.

Internal affairs

The UAW's reputation for honesty and internal democracy has been tarnished by recent events, but the convention quickly reapplied the lustre. Most embarrassing for the union was the conviction of Frank Runnels, director of region 1-E, for taking kickbacks from workers' compensation lawyers. The UAW executive board removed him from office following the conviction and confirmed their decision at the convention by consolidating region 1-E with region 1-A under director Earnest Lofton. The convention condemned Runnels' betrayal of his stewardship.

The union conducted additional housecleaning. Several officials from Chicago were reprimanded by the UAW Public Review Board, an oversight body of distinguished academics, for improper administration of pension funds. No other major union has such an internal oversight body.

More damaging in substance than reputation was the secession of the Canadian locals from the UAW. In 1984, Canadian auto worker locals, under the direction of UAW Vice President for Canada Robert White, requested broad autonomy in the administration of their affairs. The UAW executive board ruled the request excessive and demanding of more powers for White than were endowed to international President Bieber. Consequently, the Canadians established *de facto* independence in 1985, and made it *de jure* through the formal procedures of the convention. Amended constitution article 53 transferred property and more than \$30 million to the new CAW-Canada. The UAW lost about \$15 million per year in dues, but retained its international status through the Wallaceburg, Ontario, Local 251, with 1,800 members, which voted to remain in the Detroit-based union.

President Bieber and the delegates prologued the amicable separation, extending a friendly hand to the new union and promising to keep the lamp of hope lit for a future reconciliation. The departure of 120,000 Canadian members drops UAW membership to about 1.1 million, the lowest total since 1961.

The issue of Canadian autonomy reflected upon a proposed resolution for direct elections of union officials. Twenty locals submitted 31 resolutions on the adoption of a referendum system to replace the convention/delegate sys-

tem. Proposals ranged from simple direct rank-and-file voting for international officers to conducting referenda on all important issues. Supporters argued that a change would stimulate internal democracy and make the international leadership more responsive to the wants and needs of grass roots membership. They blamed the convention system for encouraging abuses in some other international unions.

However, the constitutional committee of the convention encouraged retention of the existing system. Referendum voting, they argued, could engender constant factionalism and infighting which might open the UAW to monitoring by government agencies or other bodies. They believed incumbents would have unfair advantages which might lead challengers to seek assistance from sources not having the best interests of the union as a priority. According to the committee report, only two major unions, the Steelworkers and Mineworkers, still utilize the referendum system; the Electrical Workers union (IUE) switched to the convention format in 1978 to alleviate administrative problems. Considerable debate followed the committee report, and the convention eventually agreed to retain the current system.

Appropriately, the elections procedure debate fueled the controversy in a particularly intense contest for director of UAW region 5, comprising south central States. Incumbent Ken Worley defeated insurgent candidate, and onetime assistant, Jerry Tucker by a single vote, 325-324. Tucker's "New Directions" movement contested the eligibility of several delegates and convinced the entire convention to postpone Worley's installation as regional director until the credentials committee could rule on the matter. After deliberation, the committee upheld Worley's election by an official tally of 324.577 to 324.416 (fragmented voting is common under the delegate system). All other regional directorships were decided by acclamation, except for one noncontroversial race.

At the international level, Raymond Majerus was reelected secretary-treasurer, with Odessa Komer, Marc Stepp, Stephen Yokich, and Donald Ephlin retaining their respective vice presidencies. An attempt to remove Ephlin from office because of opposition to the Saturn agreement (discussed below) which he engineered failed when the dissidents' nominee refused to challenge. The delegates voted to increase the salaries of the president (from \$74,893.97 per year to \$82,268.76); the secretary-treasurer (from \$67,252.05 to \$74,359.37); international executive board members (from \$56,634.97 to \$63,360.34); and international representatives (from \$42,227.51 to \$48,151.12).

Cosmic controversy

Paradoxically, the issue stimulating the most controversy and debate was one that procedurally belonged in the realm of a collective bargaining convention, not a constitutional one. Saturn, the name of both an innovative collective bargaining agreement and the new subsidiary corporation of General Motors, proposes to operate an auto factory in Spring Hill, TN, utilizing a cooperative labor-management

relations process. Workers will receive a salary in lieu of hourly wages, estimated at 80 percent of the industry average wage, but will be eligible for performance bonuses. Under the participatory management provisions of the agreement, workers will have positive roles in company decisionmaking. Another key provision of the contract is protection against layoffs. Also, management can utilize workers in a variety of job categories because the myriad of job classifications in the traditional auto factory have been greatly reduced.

Some dissidents charged that this departure from the traditional collective bargaining process places the worker on "the sacrificial altar of industry domination." It is concessionary, they charge and, citing the many violent struggles the union has fought to get current wage and benefit levels, insist that it endangers the future existence of the trade union movement. Victor Reuther, a UAW cofounder, has served as the symbolic leader of this group.

Under article 19 of the union's constitution, the dissidents succeeded in getting the floor to debate Saturn. Delegates Peter Kelley of Local 160 and Al Gardner of Local 600 argued that the article's section 3 prohibited union officials from negotiating contracts without prior approval and ratification by workers in the collective bargaining unit. Given that the workers for Saturn have not been hired, they claimed the agreement was invalid. In addition, they challenged the agreement for violating section 6 of the same article which states that the executive board shall not encourage rivalry among locals and shall protect superior agreements. Gardner charged that Saturn allowed "whipsawing" of one local against another because its concessionary provisions would cause employers to demand similar contract concessions from other locals. The protests noted that officials of Chrysler Corp. and General Motors have hailed the future "Saturnization" of the auto industry.

The Saturn debate lasted 2 hours and extended the convention well past the scheduled recess time, with the delegates eventually voting to table the issue for the proper forum of the 1987 collective bargaining convention. But the catalyst for convention action was Bieber. He pleaded with the delegates not to tie the hands of the executive board by abrogating the agreement and thereby create another unorganized auto plant. The Saturn experiment was a conduit through which the UAW would get its foot in the door of a right-to-work area and then branch out to organize the nearby Nissan factory in Smyrna, TN, and the proposed Toyota plant in Georgetown, KY. Citing the joint GM-Toyota venture in Fremont, CA (New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc.), Bieber reminded the convention that the UAW members working there would have lost their jobs to plant closure if not for the implementation of a cooperative concept. He also reminded the dissidents that Chrysler Corp. failed to get Saturn-like agreements in collective bargaining contracts negotiated in 1985, and that once hired, the work force at Saturn could vote to change conditions. The dele-

gates supported Bieber. (As the UAW debated the issue, the National Labor Relations Board upheld the UAW-Saturn pact as legal and not in conflict with Tennessee right-to-work or Federal laws as charged by the National Right-to-Work Committee.)

A milder controversy arose over the question of dues payments. A resolution called for supplemental funding for the UAW Walter and May Reuther Educational Center in Black Lake, MI, appropriated from dues payments. Dues are collected on 2 hours pay per month for each individual and surpluses over the \$500 million strike fund are rebated to locals. Some delegates, not opposing aid for the educational center, used the opportunity of debate to criticize procedures approved at the 1983 convention for taking extra dues from members based on bonuses and profit-sharing amounts. The anti-Saturn delegates charged that this system aided the cause of employers who desired bonuses and profit-sharing pay increases over the annual improvement wage plan. A third protest contingent argued that bonuses and profit-sharing sums were not wages and should not be considered in dues payments. Protests notwithstanding, the delegates voted to accept the resolution designed by the constitutional committee for additional funding of the educational center and continuance of the dues system adopted at the 1983 convention.

Other resolutions were recommended and adopted with little controversy. The UAW reaffirmed its commitment to social and economic progress by supporting women's rights, the concerns of the needy, civil rights, protection of the environment, and similar concerns.

Solidarity forever

Historically, the UAW has sought to build bridges of cooperation with others in the labor movement. This convention reinforced that effort. The UAW cancelled reservations at the Disneyland Hotel to honor picket lines of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union, depriving the struck hotel of an estimated \$600,000 in revenue. The convention promised more assistance for distressed unions as when the UAW sent supplies to the flood ravaged coal miners of West Virginia in 1985.

Just as important was the international flavor of the convention's call for worker solidarity. The UAW invited trade unionists from 16 countries to attend, including Yugoslavia, Malaysia, India, and South Africa. Resolutions were adopted condemning suppression of workers' rights in Poland, South Africa, and Chile.

Bieber's keynote address contained a fitting summation for this convention and the end of the first 50 years of the union. "Brothers and sisters," he said, "there have been dark moments along our 50 years of struggle. By ourselves, we could not have survived, let alone prospered. We did—because we stood together." He then closed by paraphrasing labor's anthem, Solidarity Forever, stating, "together there is no power greater anywhere beneath the sun, for the UAW makes us strong." □