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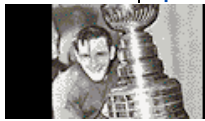
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Thursday, March 09, 2006

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Concessions spark UAW bickering

Rouge worker taps into growing discontent with effort to reverse health care givebacks.

[Josee Valcourt / The Detroit News](#)

The United Auto Workers' vaunted solidarity is being tested by a growing divide between union leaders and rank-and-file workers calling for an end to givebacks.

Workers like Gary Walkowicz at Ford Motor Co.'s Dearborn Truck Plant are pushing union leaders to adopt a "no concessions" position as they negotiate with Detroit's ailing automakers and parts suppliers.

Walkowicz recently spearheaded the passage of two resolutions at Dearborn Truck -- one that would give retirees the right to vote on proposed changes to their benefits and a second that would tighten rules for ratification votes at union halls.

Walkowicz, a candidate to be a delegate at the UAW's constitutional convention in Las Vegas this June, wants similar resolutions passed throughout the union and is calling on fellow hard-liners to make themselves heard at the convention.

"I am hoping that everyone opposed to concessions will be running for convention delegate this year," he wrote in a letter posted on futureoftheunion.com, a Web site popular with dissident union members.

With the 2007 contract talks between the union and the UAW approaching, UAW members are increasingly falling into two camps -- those who believe some concessions are necessary to safeguard future jobs and those who oppose any concessions on hard-won pay and benefits.

Since October, General Motors Corp. and Ford have struck deals with the UAW that allow for workers and retirees to contribute more for health care. But rank-and-file workers ratified the deals by surprisingly narrow margins. And workers at Ford have circulated a petition to reverse the ratification of the health care changes.

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pursuing a similar deal.

Bankrupt supplier Delphi Corp., meanwhile, is pushing the union for dramatic wage and benefit cuts.

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A growing chorus of union activists is calling on the UAW to fight any attempt by auto companies to cut pay and benefits for active workers and force concessions on retirees. Dissident groups like Soldiers of Solidarity, which formed in the aftermath of the Delphi bankruptcy, have been organizing town hall-style meetings in factory towns across the Midwest.

Roger Kerson, a UAW spokesman, declined to comment specifically about a grassroots push to stop concessions.

Despite the opposition, UAW President Ron Gettelfinger is expected to be re-elected at the convention in June without opposition.

Union experts say the dissension is not surprising considering the global changes roiling the domestic auto industry and organized labor. But the opposition does not mean that the UAW is splintering.

"Protests are to be expected," said Michael Whitty, a business professor at the University of Detroit Mercy. "Unless you've seen a cluster of locals up in arms, we're not quite at a crisis point for revolt against UAW leaders."

Jerry Sullivan, president of UAW Local 600 in Dearborn, said hundreds of resolutions are routinely submitted to amend the UAW constitution. It doesn't mean they pass at the convention. He doesn't believe that retirees should vote on changes to labor agreements or that the recent votes on health care modifications should be overturned.

"To change a vote that was ratified by a majority is wrong," Sullivan said.

Lawrence Roots, a University of Michigan labor and management professor, described opposing union members' response to the health care changes as a "legitimate expression of their views."

But he also said he sympathizes with union leaders who are trying to protect workers' jobs and pay at a difficult time for entire auto industry.

"Everyone is in a hard situation right now," Roots said. "The union's in a difficult situation. The companies are in a difficult situation."

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