

# The Auto Industry

Concretizing Working Class Solidarity:  
Internationalism beyond Slogans

Sam Gindin



**Socialist Project**  
Socialist Interventions Pamphlet Series

## Socialist Interventions Pamphlet Series

This pamphlet series is meant to encourage principled debate amongst the left and the working class to advance a viable socialist movement in Canada. Democratic debate and dialogue is encouraged within and beyond the Socialist Project.

1. Sam Gindin, The Auto Industry: Concretizing Working Class Solidarity: Internationalism beyond Slogans (April 2004).

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## About the Socialist Project

At a meeting in Toronto in the fall of 2000, some 750 activists responded to a call to “rebuild the left” by developing a structural movement against capitalism. This call for a new political formation that would be “more than a movement, less than a party” was similar to other initiatives in Canada and around the world that have been undertaken as the traditional organizations of the political left have waned.

The call was based on the understanding that the discovery and creation of a new kind of left politics is not going to be easy. It was in this spirit that, when the first Toronto initiative faltered, a group of independent socialists continued to meet with other activists across Ontario to try to learn from the experience and find a way forward. The group asked hard questions about how radically different from that first initiative a new political formation of the left would need to be. And they exchanged ideas and assessments of the political situation in Canada and the world, both to focus debate and arrive at the areas of political agreement.

Out of this process, the political statement was completed, launching the Socialist Project as a new political formation on the Canadian left.

For further information on the Socialist Project and our Political Statement, check our website at [www.socialistproject.ca](http://www.socialistproject.ca) or contact us at [<socialistproject@hotmail.com>](mailto:socialistproject@hotmail.com)

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## Unions and Jobs

For workers with relatively prized employment—and for workers with relatively limited choices—nothing is more important than hanging on to their jobs. Yet this is precisely where unions have been weakest; the history and structure of unions has revolved around the price and conditions of work, not around creating or retaining the jobs themselves. This gap has become all the more evident over the past two decades, as corporations accelerated

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outsourcing and job relocation and as governments reinforced this both legislatively and through their own adoption of privatization and downsizing. This direction not only undermined worker security, but weakened workers'

organizational strength: the intensified competition for jobs tended to replace solidarity with individual survival, and to limit working class goals to hanging on to what workers currently had, as opposed to what we might collectively build and share.

How can we change this? The issue of jobs, as well as of equality, the environment, achieving fuller lives, and of developing a deeper and more meaningful democracy cannot be solved within capitalism. A social system organized around the control of production by a minority, and maximizing profits above all else, is—as is increasingly evident—inherently limited in addressing human needs and potentials. Yet we live in the present not the future, and so cannot avoid addressing the world as it is today. The issue that we in the **Socialist Project**—a group of individual activists from workplaces, the community, and universities that came together to ask these kinds of questions—have consequently emphasized is how to resist and fight for improvements now, while also building our collective capacity for more fundamental change later. That is, how to link the present and the future.

This demands rethinking what unions do and developing new organizational capacities across unions and communities. The specifics of addressing jobs will include general principles, but it will of necessity also involve variations across sectors. The tactics chosen in the steel industry might be different that those

appropriate to aerospace; what works for teachers might be different than what works for nurses or hydro workers. In each sector, there will also be issues beyond jobs, like 'responsible production'. In this pamphlet, we attempt to get this project going by focusing on jobs in the auto industry. (The issue of responsible production, of special significance in auto with its heavy environmental impact, will be part of another pamphlet).

In addressing the issue of jobs, the question of the relationship between internationalist principles and national realities is crucial to both the labour movement and the movement which has, since the late nineties, shown such great energy and potential: the anti-globalization movement. For workers, the excess capacity within the North American (US-Canada-Mexico) industry raises the question of how can we avoid, or at least limit, self-destructive international competition amongst workers desperate for jobs. For the anti-globalization movement, with its internationalist starting point, it has become clear that strengthening itself internationally must mean deepening its base domestically/nationally. For both, therefore, the issue is how to make the slogans of internationalism concrete. Can we strengthen our ability to defend ourselves where we live and work *through* developing our ability to struggle alongside others elsewhere? Can we contribute to international solidarity *through* struggles taken on at home? What kind of project, in other words—might build *both* our national and international capacities for resistance and change?

## Strategizing: General

Before presenting a particular project for consideration, some general comments on context and on how we think about strategies might be useful.

### a) The Need for an Independent Orientation

Nothing is more important to workers than having their own perspective on what they face. Without it, we condemn ourselves to the limits of capital's terrain. Wandering on their terrain, we inevitably get disoriented and demoralized. This is especially the case in getting trapped into defining our interests in terms of 'competitiveness'.

Consider an example based on a Canadian experience: In the mid-sixties, the then Canadian section of the United Auto Workers accepted the fact that the auto industry, basically American-owned, would be international in scope. But the union, however, argued that these dominant companies must be regulated in terms of *guaranteeing* benefits to Canada. That principle was incorporated in a Canada-U.S. agreement called the Auto Pact. In essence, the argument was that if companies wanted to sell and make profit here, they must make commitments to Canadian communities through investment and job creation. The principle was not chauvinist; the union claimed no special rights for Canada. What was so powerful about the rule was that the corporate ‘commitment’ demanded would be linked to the size of the domestic market, so workers elsewhere could also apply it in their own country.

The value of this approach was clearest when, in the late seventies, the downturn in the auto industry, along with the longer-term intensification of international competition, led to corporate

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pressures for concessions. The union argued that the issue of jobs did not and should not depend on regulating *workers* and lowering their standards, but on regulating the *companies* through strengthening the auto

pact rules (i.e. moving to a closer and more enforceable match between market shares and community commitments for *all* companies: American, Asian, and European). The union emphasized that accepting the race to competitiveness through lower standards in wages and working conditions could not be a worker goal because its likely outcome would only be to increase pressures on workers elsewhere to do the same—so we'd all remain at the same level of insecurity, but with a lower level of compensation.

Competitiveness can't address working class needs because even from the most narrow perspective, there will always be someone else ready to take your job once you play the game that way. More important, once you're on this terrain, your ally becomes the company and the enemy becomes other workers; working class independence fades and working class solidarity is undermined. Competitiveness ultimately translates into workers

competing against each other and so weakening themselves as a class (In contrast, competition strengthens capital as a class; individual firms might disappear but at the end of the day, the remaining capitalists are more productive and powerful).

The point isn't that autoworkers were blind to the real-life constraint that competitiveness represented, but that in refusing to make competitiveness their goal, they could identify the constraints as something we had to cope with and overcome. By emphasizing the strengthening of the Auto Pact and regulations on corporations, attention was shifted from what or how much workers should give

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up, into campaigns within auto communities to get others on side with our demands. Workers consequently had an independent perspective, an independent set of demands, and an orientation to

building a culture of resistance during this period of heightened corporate aggressiveness. The issue, it should be emphasized, was not limited to workers' actual ability to *win* their demand. Though the goal was seen as realistic, the actual political achievements in improving on the auto pact were in fact very limited. The strategic point, however, was that the union had a *focus*: a project with different goals and assumptions than that of the corporate-dominated 'common-sense' of competitiveness.

The danger today is that globalization and the free trade agreements seem to have wiped any regulation of corporations off the agenda. With no alternative or independent orientation, what exists becomes 'inevitable'. The corporate view of the world becomes the only view of the world. Workers, demoralized and with no sense of what to struggle for, are left vulnerable not just to concessions, but to a larger disorientation that affects the future strength of their organizations and any prospects for a broader and internationalized solidarity.

## b) Internationalism Starts at Home

In the absence of an alternative to focus on, workers may—instead of blaming corporate decisions or capitalist 'logic'—tend towards blaming other workers. When jobs expand in Mexico, while disappearing in the United States or Canada, there is a serious

### Catering to Corporations or Challenging Them?

In the past, addressing jobs and an industrial strategy for Canada seemed to imply supporting Canadian-owned companies. More recently, however, as Canadian business increasingly shifted its perspective from the national level to the global level, an obvious question emerged: ‘What is really ‘Canadian’ about Canadian-based companies?’ (To some extent, this was always the question, but it was especially highlighted by how business lined up in the fight against free trade). Yet this skepticism about the motives of ‘Canadian’ business hasn’t at all reduced pressures to cater to the corporate sector. The argument now isn’t so much about the nationality of corporations, but simply that if Canada wants to be a global economic player it will have to make itself into a competitive space to attract investment no matter where that investment is from.

One aspect of this—now common in the auto industry—is that new investment, bringing new jobs or retaining existing jobs, will only come if there are government subsidies to the companies. It’s not difficult to understand why workers, confronting limited options and desperate to keep their jobs, might support such subsidies. But for the movement as a whole, it is crucial to understand both how dangerous such a direction is, and that it ultimately aggravates rather than resolves the issue of improving our lives.

To begin with, once subsidies are a condition for jobs, all corporations in a sector (and across all sectors) will ask for the subsidy—they would be stupid not to do so, whether they in fact need it or not (Nissan, for example, recently raised the prospects of a new plant in Canada and made it clear that it considers subsidies an automatic part of the business that doesn’t have to be justified). But if all jurisdictions are handing out money, then we are back to square one: the size of the subsidies will be bid up, governments will have fewer resources for social programs—which are already in jeopardy—and at the end of the day, workers will be no more secure about their jobs.

Moreover, in accepting the logic of subsidies—that we have to pay corporations for jobs rather than insist on their responsibilities to the community—we reinforce an ideology that will haunt us wherever we are engaged in defending our individual and collective needs. For example, once the ideology of catering to corporate demands takes hold, pressures could increase to make Canada more attractive by weakening regulations on

pension funds, reducing corporate and high-income taxes (meaning we pay more), weakening labour laws, or dampening down any hopes for better and safer working conditions.

This ideological danger is reinforced by an organizational danger. If groups of workers are arguing for subsidies for themselves in order to ‘win’ jobs against other workers (or that other workers will pay for), or if we’re supporting corporate subsidies while governments are cutting back on housing or child care or unemployment insurance—then it becomes all the more difficult to build the kind of solidarity and alliances that we will need to defend ourselves in future struggles.

This isn’t about being ‘pure’ and ignoring the ‘real world’. Rather, it’s about being very aware of the realities we face and coming to see that expecting corporate subsidies to solve our problems is what is in fact so ‘unreal’. It is true that we operate within the current constraint that some government contributions to corporate investments seem to have become a fact of life. But coping with this trend must include recognizing, and acting on the fact that, corporate subsidies won’t ultimately solve our problems, but will rather aggravate them. Relying on corporate subsidies will divert us from solutions that—however difficult—at least have some prospect of truly improving our collective lives and, most important, such a direction threatens to undercut what we stand for, confuse who we stand with, and undermine what we need most—to build a movement with the collective capacity to provide genuine options in the future.

danger of a racist response. That backlash might, in the context of a serious economic downturn, translate into workers being mobilized around simply banning any imports from third-world countries like Mexico. (Mexican workers may themselves not be immune from this; as auto parts jobs shift to China, Mexican workers may react against Chinese workers).

To overcome divisive responses it is necessary to take competition between workers out of the equation—or at least limit that competition. This implies a collective bargaining and political strategy that is international in scope. The barriers involved in establishing the requisite internationalism to achieve this have

often been emphasized as differences in language and culture, legal frameworks and social programs, and—more generally—the extremely uneven development *between* countries. However, the more damning barriers are not so much between workers in separate countries, but our lack of strength *within* each country. Workers who have little power domestically are not going to be able to contribute much towards developing effective power across borders.

So, for example, if the UAW can't even organize auto workers in their own country, how can it deliver on any promises of help to Mexican workers? (Note that the level of unionization in the

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American parts industry is down to about 15%, which effectively means that unions are no longer setting standards in that sector). If Canadian auto workers can't develop fraternal relations and engage in joint efforts

with Canadian steelworkers in the same communities facing the same problems, what hope is there for success in joining with Mexican workers? If Mexican unions remain incompletely democratized and cut off from communicating with other Mexican workers within even the *same* company, how can we honestly talk of putting internationalism on the agenda?

The point is that internationalism begins at home. Building a strong, solidaristic organization domestically is the *condition* for any meaningful internationalism.

### c) Thinking Big

There are times when being defensive and hanging on to what you have is in fact quite radical. It *is* 'thinking big'. This was true in the transition period of the mid-late seventies and early eighties when corporations in Canada and the United States concluded that the earlier period, which assumed steady progress for workers, had become a barrier to continued success. But today, attempts to be merely defensive will only demoralize us and confirm our defeats. Today, even if all we want is to be defensive and maintain past gains, we must risk thinking ambitiously. And that means redefining what is 'realistic'.

### d) A Strategy for Auto Can't be Self-Contained

Even if our goal is only to affect auto, we can't be successful unless we place any auto strategy in a broader social context.

There was a time when US workers could bargain their way to success and when Canadians could focus on catching up, through their own bargaining, with the Americans. But as corporate power—aided by the state—increased dramatically, continued progress made it essential for the unions to further develop their countervailing power. This required both responding more militantly in the workplace *and* broadening the union's base of support beyond the workplace. The failure to do that was an important part of the downfall of the American auto workers: it left them isolated from the support of others who hadn't shared their success, and vulnerable to the threat that concessions were better than having to find another job (since the gap with other workers was so high).

In Canada, workers did position themselves better. Through plant takeovers and strikes against outsourcing to maintain community jobs, and by acting alongside their communities to defend social standards (the rotating community-based strikes known as the Days of Action) unions like the CAW positioned *themselves*—rather than the companies—as the leader in the fight for jobs. But this was not enough. The Auto Pact had been lost because, given the general trend to free trade, addressing just auto seemed like a 'special-interest' demand. The only way to keep the Auto Pact (and now, regain it) would be to generalize it, to show that it represented a crucial precedent for the anti-globalization movement as a *whole*, and therefore to put it in the context of broader goals and a broader mobilization.

For Mexico, the danger is that any success in closer ties to other auto workers within North America might further separate them from their own community. That is, if higher wages are received in auto plants and that is all that happens, Mexican workers will ultimately experience the same (or worse) isolation than that experienced by American auto workers—if not today, when auto investment in Mexico is relatively strong, then tomorrow when the corporations decide its time to be more aggressive. The answer is of course not to avoid international ties and international standards, but



to always be sensitive to doing this in such a way that our strategies maintain or strengthen domestic ties between Mexican workers and their communities.

## A Canada-U.S.-Mexican Project in Auto

The three-part proposal below is not radical in the sense that it limits itself to addressing the issues *within* the context of North American capitalism. It is nevertheless radical in the context and mood of the times by representing a break with the range of options that are normally on our agenda. The aim of the proposal is to *build our institutional capacity and confidence to take on future struggles*, while making particular material gains for our members. The proposal therefore addresses ways to build our unions and expand the scope of bargaining, linking it with political mobilization—while demonstrating a concrete internationalism that might perhaps inspire others to develop different, but parallel campaigns.

### 1. A Continent-wide Auto Parts Organizing Campaign

Over 80% of the total parts workers in Canada-U.S.-Mexico are non-union. This blocks workers from showing bargaining leadership within the parts sectors, and threatens assembly workers with the obvious pull it creates for outsourcing. Moreover, the outsourcing that has already occurred and the dependence on just-in-time production implies a significant *potential* shift in power from assembly to parts workers (slowdowns in key auto parts workplaces can now dramatically affect a wide range of assembly plants). So organizing auto parts workers is doubly important.

The first step is to win our leadership and members over to the importance of such campaigns. The second is to set aside sufficient resources. The third is to convince unorganized parts workers that they really do have a choice in getting their own voice and that they will have our full support. Corporate threats to move plants trying to get a union would in general be neutralized by the international nature of the campaign (where will they go?).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Over 95% of GM, Ford, or Chrysler vehicles are produced regionally (U.S.-Mexico-Canada) and the non-American producers are moving (slowly) to that same regional standard. There is of course the possibility that the companies might respond by moving abroad, but a) this risks a backlash, especially in the context of a mobilized campaign; and b) this is addressed in the following section.

In addition, our assembly plants would have to be ready to refuse to use components from plants that still tried to move as a result of an organizing campaign. The final element is to convince the auto majors, by way of our clear determination, that the issue is not whether we will organize the parts sector, but *when*. We would expect them, in order to minimize the turmoil they will face on the way there, to insist that any supplier allow fair organizing campaigns: e.g. providing complete lists of workers and guaranteeing no corporate pressures or threats, just as candidates in a political election have a right to voters' lists and to security from intimidation.

Resources would generally have to come from the American and Canadian unions. The UAW, for example, currently has over \$800 million in its strike fund; the interest alone on the strike fund

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has been enough to pay strike pay. What better investment than applying at least 10% of the fund to organize workers so that strikes are less likely to be undermined by lower standards? Canadians would

add their share and the Mexican unions would add whatever they can. The campaign could therefore be launched with a fund of some \$100 million and a message that we will not go away; we *will* bring collective rights to this sector.

Finally, such a campaign should be articulated in the broader terms of universal rights and linked to changes in labour law and in its administration. This is not simply a matter of bringing Mexican standards up to the 'first world'. In fact, this point is especially important within the United States itself where, in spite of its global stature, the right to organize shamefully lags so much of the rest of the world. Even in Canada, there's nothing to be complacent about—a few years ago the Ontario government passed legislation legitimating 60(!) hour work weeks. As for Mexico, workers there will themselves determine their eventual material standards, but *rights* like that of joining a union (and procedures which don't frustrate such rights) are a matter of *universal* rights that we should all have.

Such an independent political campaign for American-Mexican-Canadian labour rights would have the additional merit of providing us with an alternative to the sterile discussions about linking such rights to international agreements like NAFTA, whose substance is to undermine the significance of these very rights.

## 2. Sharing Work, Recapturing our Time

Reduced work time allows workers to take more of the gains from technology and productivity improvements in the form of time-off, relative to focusing primarily on wages and benefits. Especially in high wage sectors, the sharing of jobs that increased time-off involves, represents a solidaristic response. It limits job loss due to restructuring; it limits the conflict amongst workers over job scarcity; it restores to workers some of their personal time as a 'benefit'; and, especially important, it provides workers with the time to be more than 'just workers' and engage in community and political life. Through bargaining, reduced work time is something workers have direct influence over.

Again, the question of Mexican workers comes up: their wages are far below ours and maybe higher wages *should* be their priority. In fact, the case for reduced work-time is greater in Mexico. Consider the following example: Asked about the relative youth of the workforce at the Volkswagen plant in Pueblo, a local manager responded by rhetorically asking the questioner if he thought workers over thirty could stand the pace. The major issue for the company was to use not only speed-up, but technology, to reduce the number of workers in the plant. Meanwhile, on the way to this same plant, there is a barrio of some 2 million people desperate for work. What kind of logic would define Mexico's problems as having to get rid of more good jobs by pushing the few workers with decent-paying jobs even harder and adding to the numbers in the country's slums? The point is that in Mexico, not only is the need to protect the best jobs especially important, but a strategy that combines growing wages with a greater emphasis on sharing the existing work among more people through reduced work-time is both socially progressive and crucial to limiting the potential isolation of higher paid workers from the community.

Reduced work time can't be addressed without also taking on overtime. This has been difficult when workers have based their living standards on overtime and when future insecurity suggests taking the work when it's there. But no trade unionist can defend working overtime when fellow workers are on layoff. We should be insisting that overtime be suspended until layoffs end.<sup>2</sup>

The corporations will of course argue that we'd be driving ourselves out of jobs. The argument that we reject competitiveness as the measure of development is one part of our response. But even on their own terms, the facts are that a) North America is generally a very competitive place to build cars; b) if this is an overall response then we aren't undercutting ourselves between the three countries; and c) as for the Japanese non-union transplants, work time is one of the areas in which they generally follow the American-based companies in order to avoid unionization, so here too we wouldn't face a 'competitive' problem.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Since the companies have no intention of coming out of this recession with the same number of workers—downturns are always a vehicle for restructuring work to make do with fewer workers—layoffs will persist and therefore, so should the ban on overtime (An alternative of course is to fight the nature of the corporate restructuring of the workplace; we don't want to ignore this since we consider it crucial. But, without setting it aside, it will be harder to mobilize workers internationally around the variance in workplace conditions than in a general demand for reduced work-time). A minority of workers—perhaps 15%-25%—loudly oppose any such infringement on their "right" to overtime and in the absence of mobilization the other way (the majority being silent), they sway the leadership. A way of dealing with is to do some internal education followed by an in-plant survey asking directly whether overtime should continue when other workers are laid off (or sons, daughters, neighbours can't find work). The result, based on a number of experiences with this, is generally that the ratio of those acknowledging the importance of limiting overtime is 2/1. The leadership can then argue, in the face of that aggressive minority, that it has a mandate: the membership, not the leadership is responsible for the decision.

<sup>3</sup> Currently, since most of the layoffs are overwhelmingly within the American-based companies, the latter carry union-negotiated income security costs that the Japanese companies don't, because the workforce with the Japanese companies is relatively younger and because of the nature of their pension plans. If layoffs were limited through reduced work time—a policy which the Japanese companies would, based on past practice follow—then both the American and Japanese companies would, to that extent, have more



### 3. A North American Auto Pact

A condition for our success in bargaining or organizing is that we limit, to some degree at least, corporate mobility. Any such limits shift some relative power back to workers.

A North American Auto Pact would: a) set out certain content provisions for anyone wanting to sell in the North American market; and b) include safeguards to ensure that *each* country get investments roughly proportional with their market share. In itself, this suggestion is hardly earth-shattering: NAFTA actually has a rule in place comparable to ‘a’. A variant of ‘b’ was responsible for the acknowledged success of the Canadian auto industry. This proposal, in spite of its constraints, does not block the international integration of the industry—it only sets some social rules along the way.

Nevertheless, it does contradict prevailing ‘common sense’ and so will not only be resisted, but will be difficult to even get on the public agenda. But so what? If we’re not ready to propose an alternative common sense, we shouldn’t expect to counter the trends we oppose. A more serious concern is a lack of interest from our Mexican brothers and sisters. It is clear why US workers, who have suffered the brunt of the job loss, and Canadian workers, who are now experiencing that job loss, would support this. But what’s in it for the Mexican workers, who have seen their auto jobs increase dramatically?

Consider such an agreement with the added proviso that it wouldn’t hurt Mexico’s current higher share of production (Mexico, for example only has 5% of the Mexico-U.S.-Canada market in vehicles, but over 35% of the parts production). What such an overall agreement would therefore offer Mexican workers would be the following:

- a) It would legitimate their current ‘surplus’ and avoid a future backlash.

- b) The Mexican market is expected to grow the fastest and this proposal would therefore further legitimate, over time, their share.
- c) Right now Mexican jobs depend on a low wage strategy. This alternative framework, with jobs based on market growth, which in turn depends on rising income, would support *higher* wages for all Mexican workers as the link to jobs.
- d) It offers some security re future shifts of jobs from Mexico to China.

It should be re-emphasized that this policy is, in itself, hardly a magical solution to all our problems. Corporations will still be in control and workers will remain vulnerable. What it does do is give us something to fight *for* and—as emphasized earlier—something around which to build an alliance *with* others. Auto workers across the continent would have to join with the anti-globalization movement to challenge the logic that blocks initiatives like this proposal: we need them; they need both our resources and this modest but important example of a concrete response to globalization.

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*similar* restructuring costs. And so a struggle for reduced work time might, ironically, even *improve* competitiveness of the unionized plants at GM, Ford, and Chrysler and CAMI (again, the point is not that we want to argue on the terrain of competitiveness but that a strategy of reducing working time might also neutralize some of the corporate arguments often used against us).

## Conclusion

The three elements of this proposal—extending union organizing strategies across borders, an international campaign around reduced work-time, and a North American auto pact—combine working through unions and extending the scope of unions, bargaining and politics, the national and the international. Each element of this proposal is meant to reinforce the other. Limiting corporate mobility through trading rules creates more space for organizing and bargaining; extending unionization develops the institutional confidence to bargain and engage politically; bargaining reduced work time adds members with more time to learn and be engaged in union and political activity.

Together, these elements support an orientation that, being distinct from the dominant neoliberal ideology, can contribute to: overcoming the destructive logic of competitiveness; rising above our fragmentation through working together on common goals; and generally replacing demoralization with a self-confident sense of taking on ambitious but winnable issues (which over time, can be extended to even larger issues like what we produce and how we produce it—‘responsible production’).

The trust needed to get there will of course take some time. An immediate challenge is: can we do the on-the-ground work that generates interest within Canada for an international conference that would invite representatives from Canada, Mexico and US with the aim of getting ideas such as those raised above on the agenda of auto workers across Canada, the U.S. and Mexico?