

Jacobin magazine promotes fraudulent “democratic unionism”

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21 June 2021

A recent article in the Democratic Socialists of America-aligned *Jacobin* magazine, “Democratic Unions Get the Goods” by staff writer Alex Press, is the latest attempt by the pseudo-left to bolster the tattered credibility of the unions.

The article appears in a definite historical context. Around the world, the working class is entering into social struggles, driven by opposition to mass inequality and poverty, as well as the murderous policies of most of the world’s governments in response to the pandemic.

One of the most significant features of this upsurge is that it is taking the form more and more openly of a rebellion against the trade unions. In one struggle after another, workers are confronting not only attacks by the company but attempts by the unions to isolate their struggles and unilaterally impose settlements favorable to management.

Within the United States, the most significant expression of the rebellion against the unions is the Volvo Trucks strike in Dublin, Virginia. After rejecting two sellout contracts foisted on them by the United Auto Workers, Volvo Trucks workers have taken the initiative to form a rank-and-file committee to challenge the betrayals of the UAW and break through a blackout of the struggle, which has not even been acknowledged by the international UAW or reported in the national press.

This strike has also not been acknowledged by *Jacobin*, for the same reason the UAW is not acknowledging it: It is terrified of it. Within the writing staff of *Jacobin* and within the leadership of the DSA, there are no small number of union officials, aspiring officials and union advisors, all of whom depend upon the union apparatus and whose positions are threatened by a rebellion against it.

The purpose of “democratic unionism” as advocated by *Jacobin* is to find some new means of ensnaring workers and keeping them within the confines of the union apparatus.

In particular, Press argues for an “open bargaining” format during contract negotiations. Unions should have the goal, she says, of “having every worker show up at negotiations at least once, even if only for one hour at shift change.” Such

procedures are necessary, Press argues, to counter cynicism among workers over secret, closed door negotiating sessions, claiming that the “open bargaining” model is based on “full transparency.”

In particular, Press cites a lengthy paper authored by Jane McAlevey, a writer for the *Nation* magazine, former staffer and executive board member of the Service Employees International Union and current Senior Policy Fellow at the UC Berkeley Labor Center. McAlevey’s report is based on four case studies in “open bargaining”: the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA); the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA); UNITE HERE Local 26 in Nevada, which covers hotel and casino workers in Las Vegas; and the NewsGuild-CWA, which is part of the Communications Workers of America. In addition, Press cites the example of the United Auto Workers’ Graduate Student Organizing Committee (UAW-GSOC) at New York University.

The fraudulent character of the “democratic unionism” advocated by Press and McAlevey is given by their own examples. The NJEA sabotaged strikes in 2018 and 2019 to force through sellout contracts. The MNA is currently isolating a strike by Saint Vincent nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts, leaving them without any strike pay. UNITE HERE Local 26, which forced through a sellout deal in 2018 to avoid a strike, played a key role in maneuvers by the Democratic Party leadership to sabotage the campaign of Bernie Sanders in the party’s Nevada caucuses last year, attacking him from the right for his support for universal health care.

The most egregious example, however, is the UAW-GSOC, which Press claims was responsible for leading the strike at NYU this year to a “victory” of a \$6 per hour wage increase. In fact, this fell far short of the demands of the strikers, and the union resorted to the most antidemocratic methods, first to isolate the strike at NYU from a strike at Columbia only a few miles away—delaying the tabulating of the strike vote at NYU for weeks to give the union a chance to shut down the Columbia strike first—and then unilaterally ending the strike right before the final grading period, when

it would have been its most effective. The DSA, however, is well represented within the GSOC's leadership at NYU.

As for the case studies cited by McAlevey, their claims of the transformative potential of their "open bargaining" model are unintentionally exposed by the study itself. To take only the example of the NJEA, the entire process was tightly controlled by the union, which forced teachers to choose between either reduced health care premiums with no substantial wage increase or no improvements to health care and a somewhat higher wage increase—two offsetting proposals which left the basic economic status of teachers unchanged.

Meanwhile, the union reserved the right to "escort our own [people] out" if they "[stepped] out of line and [said] something in a meeting." McAlevey absurdly presents as a massive victory a local agreement with a measly 3.9 percent wage increase over three years, with no improvements to health care.

In other words, Press and McAlevey's "open bargaining" is a shell game aimed at putting a "democratic" gloss on a process that is no more democratic than any normal contract ratification meeting, where union bureaucrats control the mic and routinely throw out "troublemakers" opposed to the sellout.

McAlevey's and Press's brief for "democratic unionism" is the ignominious outcome of a decades-long project to "democratize" the unions. These campaigns, which produced union factions such as Miners for Democracy, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, Steelworker Fightback and countless others, sought to refurbish the nationalist and anti-communist program of the trade unions under conditions in which the unions were transforming themselves into open agents of management, collaborating with the companies and the government in carrying out plant closures and job cuts.

For a time, these factions were able to attract substantial support among sincere workers who hated the bureaucracy. But the evolution of these groups was determined not by the militancy of their supporters but by the class character of their program. Wherever they gained positions, they proved to be no better, and in many cases even worse, than the bureaucrats they replaced.

To take one prominent example, Richard Trumka, the outgoing AFL-CIO president, was elected in 1982 as president of the United Mine Workers as a so-called union reformer due to his previous association with the Miners for Democracy movement. His lasting legacy was to destroy the union as a mass militant organization (but not the UMWA bureaucracy or its assets, which swelled to \$200 million). Now his likely successor in the AFL-CIO is Sara Nelson, president of the flight attendants union and member of the

DSA.

It is striking, however, the degree to which McAlevey's and Press's brief for "democratic unionism" is unconnected even from the pretense of appealing to rank-and-file workers or a criticism, even in a vague or dishonest way, of the existing union leadership. Indeed, given the fact that *Jacobin* has long whitewashed the real record of the unions, readers of the magazine may be left confused by their use of the phrase. Is it possible, they might ask, that "undemocratic unionism" is actually the rule?

As always, there are also mercenary interests at work. The "open bargaining" model requires the hiring of an army of consultants, outreach coordinators and other petty functionaries. McAlevey herself offers her services on her website and also burnishes the credibility of layers within the bureaucracy as "reformers," launching careers at higher levels of the union.

In the end, "democratic unions get the goods" not for workers but for McAlevey and other well-heeled layers in and around the union bureaucracy.

The first condition for real workers' democracy is the independence of the workers from and against the union bureaucracy. Against the narrow nationalist and pro-capitalist outlook of the unions, workers must fight to develop the broadest possible international ties with workers around the world, on the basis of a common fight against capitalism.

The organizational form to achieve this is through rank-and-file committees. These committees must insist that workers have real control over the bargaining process. But this can only happen, not through organizational sleights of hand but by workers establishing their own authority separate from and against the gangsters in the union apparatus.



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