

# The role of the trade unions: Biden's fairy tale vs. reality at Dana

**Eric London****9 September 2021**

On Wednesday afternoon, President Joe Biden gave a Labor Day speech that presented a fairy tale version of the role of the contemporary trade unions.

The trade unions, Biden said, are the principal defenders of the rights of working people today. They have secured “healthcare, a pension, higher wages with a safer workplace that protects us from discrimination and harassment...the eight-hour day, a weekend, time-and-a-half overtime, safety standards, sick days, victories for us all.”

Biden, who has spent his entire adult life cutting social programs and advancing the interests of the banks and Delaware credit card companies, gave his remarks before a White House gathering of executives from the UAW, USW, SEIU, AFT and many other leading trade unions. These officials, who have annual salaries of \$200,000 to \$500,000, all agree that life within a union is fantastic. “Workers who join unions gain power...In a simple word, a union means there is democracy,” Biden told his captive audience. “You gave workers a voice, you honor the dignity of the American worker.”

As the president concluded his fairy tale and mingled with the assorted bureaucrats, the UAW “honored the dignity” of 3,500 Dana workers by ordering them to continue working after the workers rejected a sweatshop contract by a nine-to-one margin last week. The “no” vote was a courageous rejection of the UAW and USW, which spent the last two weeks showing workers what “union democracy” looks like by threatening them, lying to them, and in one case even allegedly assaulting a worker in an attempt to force the contract through.

The two-sentence “get back to work” order expresses the contempt that the unions have for the workers they suppress. After telling workers nothing about the contract and negotiations for weeks, the UAW notice reads, in its entirety, “The Tentative Agreement (TA) was rejected and we’re continuing to work under a day-to-day extension. We are starting to meet with the locals to identify issues.” The company simultaneously ordered workers to work mandated overtime this weekend in order to stockpile parts in case of a strike.

As Biden praised the trade unions from the commanding heights of economic and political power, Dana workers angrily

denounced the UAW and USW for conspiring with the company against them. These workers view the announcement as a slap in the face. They view the UAW and USW not as liberators, but as oppressors. As for the claim these organizations protect the eight-hour-day and 40-hour-week: at Dana, the UAW and USW actively oppose these demands.

The UAW and USW force workers to labor under conditions worse than the 19th century. Many work for 12 hours a day, or 84-hours a week, for weeks or even months on end without an unpaid day off. Constant speed-ups are demanded to make driveshafts, axles and other critical parts for corporations like Ford, General Motors, Stellantis, and John Deere, as well as the US military. Many plants are dirty, hot, and dangerous. Injuries are common, and the company sends workers to company doctors who tell them they are fit to work. Workers describe Dana alternatively as “hell,” “a prison,” or “a slave ship.”

The plants are Petri dishes for the coronavirus and the UAW and USW have kept workers on the job throughout the entire pandemic while corporate profits soar. There are 63 active cases at Dana’s plant in Dry Ridge, Kentucky, a fact which places the population of the town and entire region at risk.

Some plants worked skeleton crews even in spring of 2020 when the Big Three plants were shut down. It was the UAW that ordered workers back to work after wildcat strikes shut down production in March and April 2020, making it possible for the corporations to end restrictions and restart production. Dana workers now fear their children are being sent back to school as more and more evidence emerges that the Delta variant is deadly for children. The main teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers and National Educators Association, are forcing teachers back to school with deadly consequences. Dozens of teachers and young children have died as a result and millions more are getting sick.

The same is true of the trade unions in every industry and in every country. In Germany, the head of the main union federation is denouncing striking train drivers who have been forced to bear the brunt of the pandemic. In Brazil, the trade unions call off strikes and hold the industrial working class back as the country’s fascist president, Jair Bolsonaro, threatens to establish a dictatorship. In countries like India that are too poor to have mass access to the vaccine, the unions

force hundreds of millions to work as the pandemic devastates the working class. The unions rely on violence, deception, and isolation to force through the diktats of the governments and the corporations.

The problem is not poor leadership and the solution is not internal reforms and new officials. Rather, the trade unions have been transformed from workers' organizations into pro-corporate organizations of the capitalist state, inseparably integrated into the capitalist parties and imperialist armed forces. They engage in outright naked criminal activity against the workers. This week, two former UAW presidents, Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, began serving sentences at "club fed" minimum-security prisons for accepting corporate bribes in exchange for selling out workers. Their prison sentences are much shorter than the five-year prison sentence imposed by the Tentative Agreement, many Dana workers point out.

The trade unions are not pursuing a mistaken policy. They are pursuing the class interests of the affluent social layer that comprises the trade union bureaucracy. These are not so much "unions" as they are corporatist Labor Fronts, state organizations aimed explicitly at controlling the workforce and suppressing the class struggle.

The trade unions as a whole employ thousands and thousands of affluent people who occupy key positions in the Democratic Party, the corporate media, government bodies and academia. They control immense fortunes, acquired through decades of workers' dues money. The United Auto Workers (UAW) has over \$1.1 billion in assets and employs 450 people who make over \$100,000. The United Steelworkers (USW) has assets over \$1.5 billion, a 600 percent increase since 2000, a period over which USW membership has drastically decreased.

This layer of the richest top 10 percent benefits from the heightened exploitation of the working class, from cheap labor, from reopening factories and schools in the pandemic. The union VEBA slush funds and their own personal stock portfolios depend on increasing profit margins at the expense of the mass of working people worldwide. These people have as little in common with the workers they "represent" as the workers do with the CEOs themselves.

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) could not muster even 15 percent of Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama to support a union drive. That is not because the workers in the area do not want to fight: in recent days, high school students in Bessemer walked out demanding COVID-19 safety, and nurses in neighboring Birmingham went on strike over pay and COVID-19 health protocols. It is because workers view the trade unions increasingly as obstacles, and not vehicles, for social progress.

The growing militancy in the working class makes the ruling class and the affluent upper middle class extremely nervous. IMF reports warn of the growth of strikes and the economy is on a knife's edge, pumped up with free money from the central banks. In Biden's Labor Day speech, the president warned that

if there was a strike movement, "we'd be in real trouble." He added to the gathered union executives: "You guys sometimes underestimate the incredible value you bring to the safety, security and growth of the economy."

The pseudo-left plays a critical role in this operation, propping up the trade unions and blacking out or denouncing workers who take independent action. Groups like the Democratic Socialists of America and Socialist Alternative, as well as publications like *Jacobin* and *Left Voice*, present the trade unions in glowing terms. These organizations have prioritized the PRO Act, which will facilitate AFL-CIO union drives, and they support Biden's demand that "the government should encourage unions."

None of these organizations or publications has mentioned the struggle of Dana workers because it cuts across their anti-socialist and anti-working class political agenda. These groups speak for the same affluent social layer that runs the trade unions. They support the trade unions not *despite* their never-ending attacks on the working class, but because of them.

Nevertheless, in their emerging struggles against the global corporations and the policy of "social murder" carried out by all capitalist governments in response to the pandemic, the working class is coming into a head-on clash with the trade unions and their nationalist perspective. To confront global corporations, workers need to unite internationally. From Paris, Tennessee to Paris, France and Lima, Ohio to Lima, Peru, new organizations—rank-and-file committees—will emerge to link workers across the lines of race, nationality, industry and continent in a common, unified struggle against social inequality.



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