

# As strike movement grows, DSA-aligned groups push dead end of UAW “reform”

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Ballots have been sent out to union members on a proposed change to the United Auto Workers Constitution to permit the direct election of top UAW officers instead of the current delegate system. The holding of the referendum vote, which is set to end November 29, was mandated under terms of the settlement reached early this year between the U.S. Justice Department and the UAW, ending the federal corruption investigation of the union.

The referendum is being promoted by the Democratic Socialists of America, the *Labor Notes* publication and other ostensibly “left” organizations as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform the union. After decades of betrayals by the UAW, which has resulted in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and an historic reversal in the social position of autoworkers, the direct election of UAW officers, it is claimed, will give workers a decisive voice in the organization and democratic control over its policies and actions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party are the most intransigent opponents of the bureaucratic regime which exercises total control over the UAW and runs roughshod over the democratic rights of workers. Workers have every right to elect a union’s leading officials directly.

But as we have explained, “the direct election of the UAW executive board would not fundamentally change the character of the institution, which functions as a billion-dollar business and auxiliary of company management.” Those local union officials and their allies in pseudo-left organizations promoting the referendum, we wrote, “are leading autoworkers into a blind alley” and “diverting workers from the urgent task of building new, genuinely democratic organizations of struggle independent of the ‘union’ apparatus.”

In promoting the fantasy of UAW reform, these organizations are getting semi-official government support. This was demonstrated on October 8 when UAW independent monitor Neil Barofsky, a former high profile bank regulator, sponsored a tightly controlled online forum on the upcoming referendum featuring several members of the group Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), which is supported by DSA, *Labor Notes* and others. The 20 or so participants had been carefully vetted; many were former UAW officials. Only a small number of those participating were actual auto plant workers.

Those speaking for the UAWD were all former UAW officials who criticized the union from the standpoint of a loyal opposition. They included:

- Scott Houldieson: a former vice president in the scandal-ridden UAW Local 551 at Ford Chicago Assembly and a prominent supporter of the *Labor Notes* publication. He has long sought to block the rebellion against the UAW over successive sellout contracts and its role in enforcing the return to work after wildcat strikes over COVID-19 outbreaks in March 2020 forced the shutdown of the industry.

- Frank Hammer: a supporter of Autoworker Caravan, *Labor Notes* and a former member of the New Directions faction of the UAW bureaucracy.

Hammer served for many years as president of UAW Local 909 at the GM Warren transmission plant north of Detroit, which was closed in 2019 under terms of a sellout deal imposed by the UAW. Autoworker Caravan was set up during the 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler to promote illusions that the Obama administration would protect the interests of autoworkers. Instead, the Democratic president oversaw the slashing of new hires’ wages in half and the destruction of thousands of jobs.

- Mike Cannon: a retired UAW international representative who served as an assistant to former UAW Region 5 Director Jerry Tucker, a founder of the New Directions faction of the UAW bureaucracy.

During the October 8 event, all repeated in various ways the theme that the referendum on direct election of officers was a magic wand that would transform the grotesquely corrupt UAW apparatus into a pillar of virtue. Houldieson called the referendum “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take our union back.”

“This is a seminal movement,” Cannon said, adding, “The membership will take over the reins of the power, and we will be able to take back our union.”

No one on the panel tried to explain why local UAW officials, most of whom are directly elected, have acquiesced in the imposition of concessionary agreements, have refused to file or process grievances and have generally shown no less ruthlessness in suppressing opposition than the national leadership.

Hammer and other participants in the panel cited favorably the experience of the New Directions movement, formed by dissident layers of the UAW bureaucracy in the late 1980s reacting to mounting opposition among workers to concessions. Hammer called Jerry Tucker, a leader and founder of New Directions, “a brilliant, militant working-class organizer.”

He added, “Where are the Jerry Tuckers of today to lead this movement? Will we have a structured and fair election process that will give them a chance to win?”

New Directions shared the same nationalist, pro-capitalist outlook as the dominant Administrative Caucus and soon withered, with a few of its leaders securing cushy posts in the Administrative Caucus. In the end, New Directions had no answer to the relentless assault on jobs and wages, and its leaders went along with the closing of GM’s Buick City complex in Flint and dozens of other factories.

The degeneration and transformation of the UAW into a tool of corporate management did not flow simply from the heads of corrupt or misguided leaders, but from the fundamental changes in the structure of world capitalism, above all, the unprecedented global integration of production. The ability of global auto producers to shift production from one country to another in search of lower costs fatally undermined the nationalist and pro-capitalist program of the unions, exposing them as bankrupt.

In every country the unions responded by abandoning any defense of

workers' interests in the name of helping "their" employers undercut foreign competitors by accepting endless concessions. The result has been disastrous not just for American workers but for workers everywhere. The idea that reshuffling a few leading personnel in the unions can alter the character of these organizations, which have presided over 40 years of devastating concessions and mass layoffs, is unserious and bankrupt.

The decades-long experience of Teamsters for a Democratic Union illustrates this. On October 20, UAWD co-hosted an online event with members of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, including TDU founding member Ken Paff.

Following a federal intervention in the notoriously corrupt Teamsters union, a few of the old-line Mafia-connected bureaucrats were purged and some supporters of TDU gained posts. However, the "reform" candidate backed by the TDU, who won the government-sponsored direct election in 1991, Ron Carey, sold out the UPS strike in 1997 and was later caught up in a corruption scandal and forced to resign. For the last 20 years the Teamsters have been under the thumb of James P. Hoffa, the son of the notorious Mafia-connected Jimmy Hoffa.

In the October 20 event, Paff touted the new TDU "reform" candidate, Sean O'Brien, a Teamster vice president earning \$300,000 annually, as a "more militant Teamster." In fact, O'Brien, a longtime supporter of Hoffa, initially headed negotiations with United Parcel Service in 2017, crafting a concessions deal which was ultimately forced through by the Teamster leadership, overriding a membership vote to reject.

Another hero of the so-called union reformers is the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) group, which took over the Chicago Teachers Union in 2010. The faction, which was made up of activists affiliated with various pseudo-left groups, including the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), betrayed the 2012 teachers strike and helped successive Democratic administrations close schools, slash teacher jobs and expand charter schools. CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a former ISO leader, has played the most prominent role in herding students and teachers back into COVID-19-infected school buildings.

## **Pandemic and massive strike wave are background of referendum**

The UAW referendum vote takes place under extraordinary conditions. A deadly pandemic has taken nearly 5 million lives globally, including over 750,000 in the US. A strike movement is expanding across the country, with 10,000 John Deere workers going on strike following a 90 percent contract rejection vote. Volvo workers earlier this year struck twice, rejecting three and probably four sellout deals brought back by the UAW, while Dana Inc. auto parts workers massively rejected a contract negotiated also by the UAW. The exposure that UAW officials took company bribes in exchange for signing contract deals and embezzled millions in union funds has sent 11 UAW officials to prison, including two former presidents, and further weakened the grip of the UAW over rank-and-file workers.

Under these conditions, the Biden administration has taken unprecedented steps to shore up the trade union bureaucracy, including its well-publicized intervention in support of the failed unionization campaign at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama, earlier this year. Biden is looking to the UAW and other unions to corral workers behind his administration's aggressive policy toward China, including trade war over electric vehicles and other products and militarist provocations.

Above all, the pro-Democratic Party forces backing the UAWD campaign fear the growing influence of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party and support for the building of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, free from the control of the corporatist

unions. Keenly aware of the role the WSWS and SEP have played in the formation of such committees in the auto plants and at Volvo, Dana, Deere and other struggles, the DSA, *Labor Notes* and similar groups are working with the Biden administration to refurbish the image of the deeply discredited unions.

Jonah Furman, a reporter for *Labor Notes* and supporter of UAWD, has been repeatedly cited in the corporate-controlled media in relation to the strike by Deere workers. He has ties to sections of the union bureaucracy as well as the Democratic Party, having served as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders' National Labor Organizer in his 2020 run for the White House and as co-chair of Metro DC DSA Labor Working Group.

As the WSWS has reported, one of the groups promoting Furman and *Labor Notes* is More Perfect Union, funded by billionaire George Soros's Open Society Foundation, a corporate-backed official partner of the National Democratic Institute. The NDI is a Democratic Party-linked organization founded through the CIA-backed National Endowment for Democracy.

In reports on the Deere strike, Furman combines a few tepid criticisms of the UAW with uncritical support for the conduct of the strike by the UAW, which is deliberately isolating the workers and keeping them in the dark while union officials conspire with Deere management to ram through another pro-company contract. Furman makes no call to widen the struggle of Deere workers and to link the fight to the broader struggles of the working class. Instead, he argues that workers should place their hopes in the longtime friend of Wall Street and the military-industrial complex, President Joe Biden.

In a video posted on Twitter and widely circulated, Furman makes an appeal to Biden to bestow some token gesture on behalf of striking workers. He says, "Joe Biden is eager to be the most pro-union president in American history. Here is one important way Joe Biden can show up for labor, by getting involved in labor strikes on the side of workers."

In fact, Biden's Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack recently posed for a photo op with striking Deere workers. The same day a federal judge, appointed by Vilsack in 2006 when he was Iowa governor, issued an injunction against the striking Deere workers limiting picketing to four per gate and even banning the use of chairs and fire barrels.

Furman goes on to falsify the UAW's history by suggesting that the recognition of the union by General Motors as a result of the Flint sit-down strike in 1936-37 was a gift bestowed by Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt. He declares, "Roosevelt and his labor secretary got personally involved in the sit-down strikes of 1937 by encouraging the president of General Motors to recognize the United Auto Workers..."

This is rubbish. The victory of the Flint sit-down strike was the outcome of the mass struggle of workers, led by socialists and left-wing militants, not a gift from on high. Roosevelt himself was appalled at the seizure of the plants and only called for negotiations when he saw that the workers would not back down, and GM had no other choice but to come to terms. Less than five years later, FDR would use the services of Walter Reuther and other CIO leaders to impose a ban on strikes and back the geopolitical interests of American imperialism during World War II, even as the Democratic president threw the leaders of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party into prison.

Today, to defend themselves workers need democratic, fighting organizations more than ever. But such a movement will not come out of the UAW or the official unions. The critical task facing autoworkers is the development of their own independent initiative against all factions of the antiworker Solidarity House bureaucracy through the building and expansion of rank-and-file committees. These committees should strive to unite autoworkers with other sections of workers coming into struggle in the US and internationally, whether over health and safety, jobs, wages or working conditions. This requires above all the building of a revolutionary socialist political leadership aimed at abolishing the outmoded capitalist

profit system.



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