

Referendum on direct election of UAW officers passes

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A referendum on changing the constitution of the United Auto Workers (UAW) to allow for the direct election of top union officers has passed, according to vote totals published by the court-appointed independent monitor. In a brief statement posted on the UAW's web site, President Ray Curry acknowledged the outcome of the vote and stated the International Executive Board would begin working to draft constitutional changes.

The referendum mandates the UAW set up rules for the election of the international president and other members of the union's top leadership by direct vote of the membership, replacing the current undemocratic setup whereby hand-picked convention delegates choose the leadership.

As of Thursday afternoon, the votes had all been tallied, with 63 percent favoring direct elections. Some 143,072 ballots were returned and 140,586 valid votes were counted out of close to 1 million active workers and retirees eligible to vote, a mere 14 percent voter turnout.

While the UAW leadership made no effort to publicize the referendum vote beyond what was required by law, the abysmally low turnout reflected above all the deep alienation felt by workers toward the UAW, which has presided over decades of betrayals, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, the suppression of strikes and the slashing of wages and benefits.

A solid majority of those who did vote were in favor of direct elections, with many no doubt wishing to express their disgust with the present bureaucratic regime. Despite throwing its considerable organizational resources behind the defeat of the measure, the UAW secured only 50,971 votes against the referendum, or about 5 percent of the total number of eligible voters.

Some of the larger locals returned substantial majorities in favor of direct elections. This included UAW Local 600 covering workers at the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan (2,544–1,133); UAW Local 12 in Toledo, an amalgamated local covering workers at the Stellantis Jeep complex (1,845–485); the Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant outside Detroit (1,056–203); Ford Kentucky Truck and Louisville Assembly (3,045–712); the Detroit Manufacturing complex (747–235); the Stellantis Kokomo, Indiana,

transmission complex (1,885–477); Ford Chicago Assembly (672–165); and UAW Local 598, covering General Motors' operations in Flint, Michigan (1,618–516).

At the Volvo Trucks New River Valley plant in Virginia, the scene of a five-week strike betrayed by the UAW in July, the referendum passed 429–73, an 83 percent margin, on very low turnout, only around 17 percent. There was also a heavy vote in favor of direct elections by graduate teaching assistants, including University of California graduate Local 2865 (1,610–308) and Harvard Local 5118 (426–11).

The referendum vote was mandated under terms of the consent decree signed by the UAW with the federal government earlier this year following the exposure of massive corruption inside the union that sent more than a dozen top officials, including two former presidents, to prison. As part of the settlement, former bank regulator Neil Barofsky was chosen as independent monitor to oversee the "reform" of the UAW.

Underlying the government intervention is deep concern that the UAW is so discredited that it can no longer carry out its function of suppressing the struggles of autoworkers. The proposal to institute direct election of officers is a maneuver by elements within the US government to bolster the union's shattered credibility. One indication of this is the fact that direct election of officers has been endorsed by former U.S. Attorney Matthew Schneider, who had led the investigation of UAW corruption.

The state-mandated oversight of the UAW is part of a broader effort by the capitalist political establishment to shore up support for the increasingly discredited trade unions, with the aim of containing and suppressing a growth of the class struggle. The Biden administration, which has described itself as the most "pro-union" in history, carried out an unprecedented effort to promote a union drive at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, earlier this year. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled earlier this week that the unionization vote at the Bessemer facility must be repeated, despite the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) failing to garner any meaningful support among workers in the first election.

The UAW referendum took place under conditions of a mounting rebellion by autoworkers. The year 2021 has seen

strikes by workers at Volvo Trucks in Virginia and John Deere workers in the Midwest, both of whom voted down multiple sellout deals brought back by the UAW. The UAW eventually shut down the strikes using its standard strong-arm tactics of lies and intimidation.

The pseudo-left apologists for the UAW have hailed the passage of the referendum as an opportunity to reform the UAW. The hollowness of this claim is exposed by the fact that the entire election process, including the method of nomination and voting, will be determined by the current UAW apparatus itself.

According to terms of the consent decree, if the referendum on direct elections is approved, “the Monitor will promptly confer with the UAW to draft language amending the UAW Constitution affirming the ‘one member, one vote’ principle for inclusion in the UAW Constitution at the next UAW Constitutional Convention.”

Undoubtedly, the UAW bureaucracy will work to consolidate control over the nomination process. This is already the case in the United Steelworkers and Teamsters unions, where direct elections have long been in place. In the Steelworkers, candidates must be nominated by a certain number of local unions to appear on the ballot. In the Teamsters, candidates face a two-step process: They must first secure signatures of 2.5 percent of the membership to be placed in nomination at the national convention and then must secure support of 5 percent of delegates.

At previous UAW national conventions, the Administrative Caucus has used heavy-handed intimidation to prevent the nomination of any opposition candidates. The international president and other top officers are generally elected unanimously.

Among those foremost in promoting illusions in the possibility of UAW reform is the group Unite All Workers for Democracy, backed by the pseudo-left Labor Notes and the Democratic Socialists of America. In its report on the referendum vote, the *Detroit Free Press* quoted Scott Houldieson, who is the UAWD steering committee chairman, a supporter of Labor Notes and the former vice president for Local 551 at Ford’s Chicago Assembly plant. “This result shows that UAW members are ready to end our union’s one-party rule. We are charting a new course where we actually take on management, instead of giving them concession after concession,” Houldieson said.

The model being promoted by UAWD for the UAW is the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). However, the institution of direct elections in the Teamsters as a result of government intervention did not result in a membership takeover of the union, but a mere reshuffling within the ranks of the corrupt bureaucracy.

TDU-backed candidate Ron Carey, elected in the first direct election held in 1991, sold out the 1997 UPS strike and was then forced out over corruption involving the illegal diversion

of unions funds to his own election campaign. For the past 20 years, the Teamsters were headed by James P. Hoffa, the son of the notorious Jimmy Hoffa, whose connections to organized crime are well known.

In elections held last month, the TDU-backed candidate for Teamster president, Local 25 President Sean O’Brien, beat the Hoffa-backed candidate. O’Brien had been a long-time supporter of Hoffa and was previously suspended for violently threatening opponents. Despite this, UAWD and its pseudo-left backers hailed the installation of O’Brien as a milestone in the fight to “democratize” the Teamsters.

In an article published in Labor Notes and *Jacobin* magazine, DSA member Jonah Furman—who earlier hailed the undemocratic outcome of the Deere strike as a victory—candidly admitted that the UAWD is fishing within the sewer of the UAW bureaucracy for potential “reform” candidates. He writes, “It will be interesting to see whether any leaders of large locals, who have mostly stayed silent till now, find the courage to speak up for reform and throw their hats into the ring.” One name he mentions is Bruce Baumhower, president of Local 12 in Toledo covering Jeep workers, who played a prominent role in pushing the 2015 and 2019 national auto contract sellouts. Since the start of the global pandemic, Baumhower has worked closely with Stellantis officials to cover up infections in the plants.

What is needed is not a reshuffling at the top of the UAW, but a rebellion by workers against the whole rotten bureaucratic structure. The unending betrayals carried out by the UAW are not merely the product of corrupt leaders, but more fundamentally flow from the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of the unions, which subordinate any defense of workers interests to the drive for profit. This has led to the transformation of the unions into direct appendages of the corporations and the state.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges autoworkers to carry forward the fight to build rank-and-file committees independent of the UAW and based on genuine workers democracy. The importance of these committees has been demonstrated this year in the role they have played in galvanizing opposition to concessions at Volvo, Deere and in other struggles, as well as in exposing the unsafe and even deadly working conditions in the midst of the pandemic.



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