

Shawn Fain: A longtime cog in the UAW bureaucracy's machine

Jerry White
16 August 2022

The World Socialist Web Site has endorsed Will Lehman for UAW president. For more information on Lehman's campaign, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.

In the elections for president of the United Auto Workers, Will Lehman, the Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, is confronting two main opponents.

Incumbent UAW President Ray Curry is the candidate of the ruling faction of the UAW apparatus, handpicked by individuals who were hauled off to jail for taking company bribes and embezzling assets.

The other candidate is Shawn Fain who is being promoted as the official opposition. Fain, who is backed by Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), has talked about ending tiers, overturning past concessions and protecting retirees.

In fact, Fain has no fundamental differences with Curry. He has spent 20 years climbing up the ladder of the UAW apparatus, including the last 10 years as a top staffer at the union's national "Solidarity House" headquarters in Detroit. If elected, the only change that would occur is that he would increase his current salary of \$156,364 as an "Administrative Assistant" to the nearly \$300,000 that a UAW president pockets.

Who is Shawn Fain?

Fain was hired as an electrician at Chrysler's Kokomo, Indiana, casting plant in 1994 and quickly worked his way up the UAW Local 1166 apparatus and local county AFL-CIO Labor Council. In 2001, he began the first of his five terms as a skilled trades rep and shop chairman of Local 1166. By 2005, he was brought onto the Executive Committee of the UAW-Chrysler Area Wide Meeting of Committeemen. He was a delegate to the UAW Constitutional Convention in 2006 and selected chairman of the UAW's skilled trades sub-council in 2007.

In 2007, then UAW President Ron Gettelfinger called a six-hour "Hollywood strike" by 45,000 Chrysler workers before signing a "transformational agreement," which halved the wages of many new hires from \$28.75 to \$14.00 an hour and freed the corporation of its health care obligations to 78,000 retirees and their dependents. In return, the UAW was paid billions in corporate stock and was handed control of the retiree health care business.

While he claims to have opposed the two-tier system in 2007, in reality, Fain did little more than give advice to Gettelfinger. He told a Reuters reporter at the time that it would be impossible to organize workers at Toyota and Japanese-owned auto plants in the US if UAW members were making less than them.

When push came to shove, however, Fain supported job cuts and concessions. Selected by UAW President Bob King in 2009 to serve on

the UAW-Chrysler National Negotiating Committee, Fain endorsed the savage cuts imposed by Obama's Auto Task Force. These included reducing the wages of all new hires by 50 percent, eliminating COLA (cost-of-living adjustment), expanding the use of temporary part-time employees and laying off thousands of workers.

"It was hard to swallow the cuts, but we have to preserve jobs and the future," Fain told the *Kokomo Tribune*. "We're not happy about it, but you have to do what you have to do. Hopefully we can get back to selling cars, and this will be a bad memory like 1979 and '80."

Far from being temporary, however, the concessions would continue indefinitely even as the corporations began making record profits. In 2011, Fain was once again drafted onto the UAW-Chrysler Negotiating Committee, which agreed to a four-year pay freeze and other concessions.

In April 2012, Fain was appointed by UAW President Bob King as a UAW Chrysler Department International Rep with a salary of \$111,248. By time of the 2015 negotiations rolled around he was pocketing \$128,707 as an assistant director of the UAW-Fiat Chrysler Department.

The UAW-Chrysler Department was the center of a "culture of corruption," federal prosecutors would later say when they convicted Fain's boss, Norwood Jewell, for taking millions in company bribes for signing and enforcing pro-company contracts. It strains the imagination to believe Fain did not know what was going on underneath his nose.

He was not on the 2015 UAW-Chrysler Negotiating Committee. However, his current running mate on the Members United slate, LaShawn English, president of UAW Local 1264 at the Warren Stamping Plant, was on the negotiating committee, which unanimously backed the deal. The contract maintained the hated two-tier system and created even more layers of workers earning substandard wages and benefits or doing temp work.

This time, however, Chrysler workers shot down the deal by a 2-to-1 margin in the first rejection of a UAW-backed national contract since 1982. Stunned by the revolt, the UAW rolled out its full bureaucratic machine to force through a refurbished deal several weeks later.

There is no public record of any opposition to this criminal conspiracy by Fain. Instead, over the next few years he would be rewarded with an "Administrative Assistant" position on the Solidarity House staff. In November 2017, he was appointed as co-director of the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center in Detroit, where union officials regularly used company-issued credit cards to pay for their luxurious lifestyles.

The UAW corruption scandal

When the corrupt scandal erupted in July 2017—with a federal indictment charging that Fiat Chrysler had paid UAW Vice President and Chrysler Department Director General Holiefield more than \$1.2 million

in bribes to sign sweetheart contracts—Fain joined the UAW’s damage control operation.

First, UAW President Dennis Williams made the absurd claim that the bribing of the union’s top negotiator had no effect on the integrity of the “collective bargaining process.”

As more indictments and revelations emerged, however, demands from workers grew to overturn the illegitimate contracts. In January 2018, a class action lawsuit was filed by Fiat Chrysler workers asking the federal court to compel the UAW to return hundreds of millions of dollars in union dues defrauded from 40,000 FCA workers and to compensate them for losses during the period of “tainted bargaining.”

In June 2018, Fain was involved in a bogus lawsuit claiming that the National Training Center was the victim, not the perpetrator, of the corruption conspiracy. It claimed that the NTC was “unaware of defendants’ illegal activities due to the active concealment of such activities” and demanded a \$4.4 million judgment against FCA executives Alphons Iacobelli and Jerome Durden and Holiefield’s widow Monica Morgan.

Fain and his Chrysler co-director at the NTC Tom Rolands issued a joint statement saying the corporatist entity “has zero tolerance for wrongdoing and will work tirelessly to ensure that it operates to fulfill its intended purpose and to see that every dollar under its control is properly spent and accounted for.”

The lawsuit, filed on the eve of the UAW’s 37th Constitutional Convention, was part of the UAW bureaucracy’s claims that the corruption only involved a “few bad apples.” Before the convention ended, however, federal prosecutors declared that the UAW and FCA were “co-conspirators” in the corruption scheme. In the ensuing months, Dennis Williams, Norwood Jewell, Gary Jones and many other top UAW officials would be convicted.

In April 2019, a federal judge threw out the NTC lawsuit declaring that the corporatist scheme was a “willing co-conspirator.” Before the operation was shut down and sold off as part of a deal with the US Justice Department, the NTC continued to funnel millions to the UAW. According to 2018 and 2019 Labor Department filings by the UAW, the union received \$7,819,823 in payments from the company-funded UAW-Chrysler National Training Center. Under the address, listed as 2500 E. Nine Mile Road, Warren, Michigan, it reads: “ATTN: Shawn Fain.”

A candidate of the apparatus

Fain is a candidate of the UAW apparatus. He wants to maintain the massive bureaucracy that sustains itself on workers’ dues money while suppressing opposition to corporate exploitation.

Every union has hundreds of national, regional and local officials who have long been on the outs and want to be “in.” This is the layer to which Fain directs his appeal.

The chief concern of Fain, just like Curry, is preventing an uprising from below, led by angry young workers who work 10-12 hours a day for poverty wages and are forced to pay the UAW dues for the privilege of it. Such a revolt would threaten to sweep away the cozy positions and high salaries of the entire union hierarchy.

During his August 12 online meeting, Fain made it clear he was opposed to Will Lehman’s call for abolishing the UAW apparatus and transferring power to rank-and-file workers. “I watched his video, I get the frustration, to me abolishing everything isn’t going to fix this union, it is not going to get us on the right path in a short time. ... The IEB exists, it is there for a reason. Someone has to lead these departments, these areas, and anyone who would say they want to abolish, eliminate all that would be foolish.”

Fain said workers should not set up their own organizations to counter the UAW’s pro-corporate structure, arguing that rank-and-file workers can only “advise” the UAW leadership. “I’ve watched Will; he has his opinions, so I just disagree with the idea of abolishing everything, that’s just not a realistic approach.”

What Fain calls an “advisory committee” of rank-and-file workers would be little more than a “democratic” window dressing for the union bureaucracy. In contrast, Will Lehman’s campaign argues that the workers must establish their own democratic organizations to wage a real struggle against the corporations and restore power to the shop floor.

Fain made clear he has no political differences with the present gang in charge of the UAW. While saying he would fight plant closings and concessions, he advanced the same pro-capitalist and America-first politics long promoted by the UAW. In the name of keeping American capitalism “competitive” and fighting “foreign exports,” the UAW has colluded to destroy hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs and halve the wages of manufacturing workers.

Fain said he was a supporter of Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Party but wanted to pressure the Democrats into enacting laws like “card check recognition and different things that really support unions.”

In fact, the Biden administration has done everything possible to prop up the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions. Well aware of the worsening economic crisis and its efforts to force the working class to pay for the reckless military confrontation against Russia and China will provoke mass opposition, Biden is looking to the discredited UAW apparatus to suppress the class struggle.

In a letter to Curry on the last day of the recent UAW convention, Biden praised the UAW for “working tirelessly to keep critical manufacturing and supply chains afloat” while COVID-19 ripped through the factories. The president concluded, “I can imagine no better partner to have by my side than the UAW.”

If Fain were elected UAW president, the Biden administration and the entire ruling class would find in him a willing “partner” in the suppression of opposition and the maintenance of a bureaucratic dictatorship over the working class.

For more information on Will Lehman’s campaign, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact