

Jacobin and Labor Notes on the UAW elections: Defenders of the apparatus against the campaign of Will Lehman

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For more information on the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.

For months after the start of the United Auto Workers (UAW) election campaign, *Jacobin* magazine, associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), maintained a complete silence. The magazine did not publish a single article on what is the most significant election in the UAW's history, not only because it is the first direct election of the UAW leadership, but, more importantly, because a rank-and-file socialist, Will Lehman, is running for president.

On October 10, under the headline "After Decades of Corrupt, Antidemocratic Rule, UAW Members Are Finally Electing Their Leaders" *Jacobin* finally broke its silence, reposting an article from *Labor Notes*, written by Barry Eidlin and Jane Slaughter. The most significant fact about the article, however, is that, while promoting the candidacy of long-time UAW bureaucrat Shawn Fain, it does not even mention Lehman's campaign.

This is not confusion on the part of *Jacobin* and *Labor Notes*. The lineup is very clear. It is a lineup of the UAW apparatus, which is an organization of the ruling class to police the working class, on the one hand, and Will Lehman's campaign, which is the conscious articulation of a movement of the rank and file against the whole bureaucratic setup, on the other.

Jacobin and *Labor Notes* stand firmly on the side of the apparatus. While the article details the record of concessions contracts imposed by the UAW, it presents this series of betrayals as simply the product of some bad leaders, and everything will be resolved if some other officials take their place.

"At the heart of the [corruption] scandal," they write, "and the embrace of concessions and labor-management

partnership that led to it, lies one entity: the Administration Caucus (AC)."

Jacobin and *Labor Notes* speak for a section of the apparatus that is looking to advance its own position within the bureaucracy and sees in the corruption scandal an opportunity to elevate their positions (and therefore their salaries).

Thus, they complain that "membership [in the Administration Caucus] is a requirement for advancing up the union's hierarchy, from local official to international rep to assistant regional director to regional director."

This is why they are backing Fain, a longtime member of the "Administration Caucus" who has spent the past 10 years as a top staffer at the union's national "Solidarity House" headquarters in Detroit.

The UAW apparatus (and the ruling class) intended for the election to remain confined to the candidates that they hand-picked. The campaign of Will Lehman upended these calculations, providing a mechanism for rank-and-file workers to express their interest in opposition to the entire UAW bureaucracy. The campaign is winning growing support among workers, who have begun forming rank-and-file election committees to promote it as widely as possible.

The response of the apparatus, therefore, is to try to suppress the vote and prevent workers from knowing who is running. The corporate media has done its part by simply acting as if no election is taking place. The major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, are simply not reporting it.

The pseudo-left publications like *Jacobin* and *Labor Notes* have toed the line, writing virtually nothing about the election, even though they are backing a candidate in it.

Significantly, the *Labor Notes* report published in

Jacobin does not even mention the presidential debate sponsored by the Monitor featuring Fain, Lehman, incumbent UAW President Ray Curry and the other two candidates, Local 163 Shop Chairman “Gibby” Gibson and Stellantis autoworker Brian Keller. During the debate, Fain opposed the call by Lehman to abolish the UAW apparatus, lining up instead with the other candidates who pledged to work with the corrupt UAW bureaucracy if elected.

In an unintentional self-exposure, after detailing the efforts by the UAW bureaucracy to ram through sellout contracts over rank-and-file opposition, *Labor Notes* writes, “It is remarkable that industrial workers continue to resist, such as with the 2015 contract rejection at Chrysler and the recent defiance of the International at Volvo Trucks and John Deere.”

What *Labor Notes* does not mention is that at Volvo and John Deere in particular, the campaign against the imposition of sellout contracts by the UAW was spearheaded by rank-and-file committees in a direct rebellion against the UAW bureaucracy. During the entire course of the Volvo strike, *Jacobin* and *Labor Notes* remained virtually silent, in effect lining up with the efforts of the UAW to stamp out this incipient rebellion.

Labor Notes was founded in the 1970s by a constellation of ex-leftists, including one of the authors of the article endorsing Fain, Jane Slaughter. From its inception, it has promoted the concept that a “progressive” section of the bureaucracy can be discovered and then pressured to enact reforms. Again and again, the supposed “reformers” became leaders of the apparatus, imposing concessions and suppressing opposition just as ferociously as those they replaced.

As a model for its campaign in the UAW, Slaughter and Eidlin cite the campaigns backed by *Labor Notes* in the Teamsters union, writing, “[Teamsters for a Democratic Union] first got a candidate elected to the Teamster presidency fifteen years after it was founded, suffered a setback, and organized for sixteen more years before members again threw the dinosaurs out.”

They do not give the names of the Teamsters presidents they backed: Ron Carey and Sean O’Brien. Carey, a longtime bureaucrat prior to his election as president in 1991, oversaw a series of concessions contracts, including at UPS, before having his re-election in 1996 invalidated as a result of a massive corruption scandal.

O’Brien, hailed by *Labor Notes* as a great “reformer,” had been a long-time supporter of the union apparatus led

by Teamster President James P. Hoffa and had once even been suspended for thuggish threats made against supporters of TDU.

O’Brien is currently overseeing efforts by the Teamsters union to ram through agreements covering rail workers in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), which is part of the Teamsters. At the recent convention of the BLET, O’Brien denounced rank-and-file workers for “complaining” about the betrayals of the union to “outsiders.”

Jacobin, *Labor Notes*, and the DSA speak for sections of the upper-middle class that are deeply hostile to a genuine movement of the rank-and-file. Thus, while they write about the need for “class struggle unionism” and a “rank-and-file strategy,” when there is actually a rank-and-file movement developing in opposition to the apparatus, they ignore and oppose it.

And while these pseudo-left groups routinely denounce the WSWS as “sectarian” for refusing to support factions of the trade union apparatus and the Democratic Party, what they really fear is the growth of a movement in the working class that would threaten the considerable investment accounts of the upper-middle class.

For these services, members of pseudo-left organizations have obtained lucrative positions within the trade union apparatus. Among these is Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants CWA and a member of the DSA, who pulls in \$172,979 annual salary from her post.

Again, the choice is starkly posed; on the one side, the UAW apparatus and its various defenders, and on the other side, the interests of the working class, articulated in the campaign of Will Lehman.



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