

A tale of two elections: US political establishment calls Tunisian election (11 percent turnout) an “illegitimate sham” but praises UAW election (9 percent turnout) as “historic and democratic”

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You don't need a degree in political science to see the difference in how the corporate media and political establishment treated two elections that took place in December 2022.

The first election involved 1 million active and retired autoworkers, and nobody in the courts, the press or the two parties of big business seemed concerned about the fact that turnout in the election was only 9 percent, a sign that the UAW bureaucracy engaged in voter suppression to keep itself in power. The second election took place in the North African country of Tunisia, where 11 percent of eligible voters voted in parliamentary elections held two weeks after the UAW vote concluded.

UAW members in the US can be forgiven if they did not hear about the election in Tunisia, though as it turns out, most of them did not hear about the election in the UAW either, since the bureaucracy made every effort to keep the rank-and-file from learning about it and voting in it. (Details of how the UAW bureaucrats suppressed the vote can be found in a protest Will Lehman sent to the court-appointed monitor overseeing the election here.)

But comparing the two elections is important, because the political and media establishment hailed the UAW election as a “historic” triumph for democracy, while denouncing the Tunisian election, with slightly higher turnout, as a “sham” that proved the leadership was “illegitimate.”

When Lehman filed a lawsuit in federal court in

November warning that turnout in the first round of the UAW was on pace to be less than 10 percent, lawyers representing the UAW, the court-appointed monitor and the Biden administration shrugged off the warning and said they were not concerned about the turnout.

After the UAW election, when turnout was just as low as Lehman warned, the academic, media, legal and political establishment came together with one voice to praise this fraud as a triumph of democracy.

Professor Nelson Lichtenstein said on January 18 that the first round of the UAW election was a “genuine leadership election,” citing it as proof the union was returning to real democracy. The publication *Labor Notes*, which speaks for a part of the trade union bureaucracy represented by longtime apparatus man Shawn Fain, said the first round was a “historic change” and “nothing short of an earthquake.”

At a recent event held by the Democratic Socialists of America—a group that is not socialist but functions entirely within the capitalist Democratic Party—two leaders of the organization also praised the UAW elections, with Sofia Guimarães Cutler calling the election “an unprecedented opportunity to elect their top officers.”

The most shameless reporting came, as usual, from the *New York Times*, which wrote on December 2:

The first United Auto Workers election open to all members appears to have produced a wave

of opposition to the established leadership, signaling the prospect of sweeping changes for a union tarnished by a series of corruption scandals.

The *Times* quoted professor Harley Shaiken as saying: “The union is entering a new and profoundly different era,” implying that the election showed the UAW has broken with its past leadership’s long record of criminality. The *Times* made no mention of low turnout. Nor has recently-retired *Times* reporter Steven Greenhouse, who hosted the debates between UAW candidates in the first round and the fraudulent “runoff.”

But here’s how the *Times* reported on the election in Tunisia:

On December 20, the paper wrote an article titled “As Tunisia drifts farther from democracy, voters shun election,” which noted with indignation that “just over 11 percent of eligible voters cast ballots.” This “feeble turnout,” the *Times* wrote, was the product of efforts by “the country’s strongman president” to violate the rights of the Tunisian population.

Various professors and think tanks expressed shock over the low turnout in the Tunisian election. Monica Marks, a professor at New York University, said, “No one can find a single party of importance across the political spectrum or a civil society organization that sees Saturday’s election as anything other than a sham vote to create a Potemkin parliament.”

The Carter Center, a think tank founded by former US President Jimmy Carter, said the low turnout showed the Tunisian election “lacked legitimacy and fell short of international and regional standards and obligations.” ABC News said the low turnout showed the Tunisian political system “is now seen as disintegrating.” *Foreign Policy* magazine wrote, “Nearly 90 percent of the country stayed home during the first round of parliamentary elections,” calling this an “electoral disaster.”

There is another notable difference in the responses to the two elections. In the case of Tunisia, President Kais Saied’s opposition called for a boycott of the second round and demanded the president resign as a result of low turnout. Reuters reported that the opposition said the president “lost his legitimacy after Saturday’s

parliamentary election had a preliminary turnout figure of less than 9 percent” (this was later revised to 11 percent—higher than the UAW turnout).

However, there are no such statements coming from the “opposition” to Ray Curry and the Admin Caucus within the UAW bureaucracy, represented by Shawn Fain and his slate, UAW Members United. Although this group won the votes of less than 4 percent of eligible voters, Fain and his slate have accepted the legitimacy of the elections and refused to criticize low turnout.

Fain and Curry’s camps both hope to carry out the election as an internal contest within the bureaucracy. Brian Keller, another independent candidate, has endorsed Fain. Rank-and-file socialist Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman is the only candidate who has called for the election to be thrown out and for new elections to be run with all candidates’ names on the ballots.

There is no doubt that the Tunisian election was a fraud conducted in violation of the rights of Tunisian workers, but the corporate media and state apparatus only chose to say so because they are attempting to secure even more concessions for corporate America out of the government of Tunisia.

The black-and-white contrast in the treatment of the two elections shows that the entire political establishment holds the most basic rights of the working class in utter contempt. The UAW election was conducted from start to finish with the aim of propping up the “legitimacy” of the UAW bureaucracy, which it views as necessary to suppress the class struggle, force through sellout contracts, and keep corporate profits rolling in.



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