

UAW official appointed to \$174,000/year leadership position after donating \$25,000 to Shawn Fain's campaign

Eric London**24 February 2023**

As voting in the second round of the UAW national officers election comes to an end, a scandal has broken out that exposes both the fraudulent character of the election and the ongoing corruption and patronage that remains rampant within the UAW bureaucracy.

On Wednesday, Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), a group supporting Shawn Fain's candidacy for UAW president, issued a statement acknowledging that Local 2320 Vice President and longtime Democratic Party operative Vail Kohnert-Yount gave \$25,000 in donations to Fain's campaign and was subsequently appointed Assistant Director of Region 9A, a high-level leadership office with a salary of \$174,000, according to Department of Labor filings. Each region has only one Assistant Director, making it the highest level union official who is not elected by the membership.

UAWD's statement came in the wake of a February 17 *Detroit Free Press* article asserting that a few "mystery donors" had contributed tens of thousands of dollars to Fain's campaign. The slate of incumbent UAW President Ray Curry then published a statement claiming Fain and recently-elected Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla (a Fain supporter) proposed Kohnert-Yount's appointment and withheld knowledge about her past donations in order to avoid scrutiny. Curry himself approved Kohnert-Yount's appointment.

If true, what is being asserted is that a local UAW official donated \$25,000 and received a leadership position worth \$174,000 a year. This is exactly the type of corruption that the courts and UAW leaders have claimed they were rooting out.

As a preliminary matter, Curry is implicated in the appointment as well, since he approved it. Now his campaign is drawing attention to the appointment in a demagogic attempt to score points against Fain in the election. This aims to distract from the widely known fact that patronage and corruption are the modus operandi of the bureaucracy which he currently heads. Some of the biggest backers of Curry's career were jailed for accepting bribes from the corporations, and his campaign has falsely blamed support for every other candidate as coming from "outside sources."

The appointment is a serious matter. First, it shows that Shawn Fain and his slate are not an alternative to the bureaucracy but a part of it, and it is therefore no surprise that they engage in the

same patronage methods used by Curry and his supporters, taking workers' dues money to feed the massive apparatus of which they are a part. The fact that Curry agreed to the appointment of a Democratic Party official further shows the similarities between the Fain and Curry wings of the bureaucracy.

The appointment also exposes how a main function of the UAW apparatus is to provide jobs to an army of Democratic Party operatives like Kohnert-Yount, who use their positions to advance the aims of the Democratic Party while drawing pay from workers' dues. These officials do nothing to improve the lives of the workers they supposedly "represent" but spend their time campaigning for Democrats in elections and conducting the Democratic Party's work in between.

The UAWD's February 22 statement confirms the basic facts. Kohnert-Yount "has made significant financial contributions, totaling around \$25k," the statement admits, stating it is also true that "she was appointed by Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla to be our Assistant Director."

The statement asserts, however, that "her donations had absolutely no influence on her selection for this role" and that Mancilla "had no knowledge of the amount of her donations."

UAWD acknowledges that this is a tough sell: "We also understand why other UAW members might be concerned that she received an Assistant Director appointment after contributing time and money to a campaign. We take this concern very seriously given the opaque nature of UAW hiring and appointment processes and the history of patronage."

UAWD's statement then dismisses concerns about her appointment as being motivated by sexism, saying "accusations of favoritism are often leveled against women who demonstrate strong leadership." The statement defends Kohnert-Yount as someone who "is well positioned to address the needs of our members" because she has "dedicated her life to building the labor movement." The statement presents Kohnert-Yount as more or less a rank-and-file activist with close ties to the membership of the union.

This is not true, and rebutting it requires delving into her political career. This is an individual who has nothing to do with the labor movement. She is a well-connected Democratic Party operative from a family of high-level Democratic Party donors. It was clearly because of this history that Ray Curry saw no issue in

approving her appointment.

Kohnert-Yount graduated from Georgetown University, a top choice for aspiring politicians, where she worked as an intern in the White House under the Obama administration. White House internships are very hard to come by, usually reserved for individuals with important political connections. Kohnert-Yount's parents are high-level Democratic Party donors. One parent alone gave \$309,380 to the Democratic Party in just three years, from 2020 to 2022, according to Opensecrets.org.

According to one biography of Kohnert-Yount that is available online, "In college, Vail interned for the AFL-CIO, the White House and in the US House of Representatives." After graduation in 2013, she worked for "the Department of Labor as a political appointee in the Obama administration."

According to public records, this job was as a Special Assistant in the Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs. This Bureau was established by Harry Truman in 1947 and collaborates closely with the USAID (United States Agency for International Development), a federal agency which is closely linked to the CIA. The purpose of the Labor Department's Bureau of International Labor Affairs is to monitor and suppress the class struggle on behalf of Wall Street in every country, including through the murder and assassination of striking workers. Most recently, the Labor Department was the institution of corporate rule that oversaw the illegalization of a potential strike by 100,000 railroad workers last December.

Kohnert-Yount's name appears in the *Plum Book*, an official government publication that identifies all civil servants who were appointed to their positions by the president. The *Plum Book* lists her "type of appointment" as an "SC," which is a governmental code term for "Confidential or Policymaking Position," according to the *Plum Book*'s appendix. An American Constitution Society document about the *Plum Book* explains that an individual with an "SC" designation "requires a close working relationship with the incumbent officeholder or key political officials."

After working at the Labor Department, Kohnert-Yount graduated from Harvard Law School, began working as an attorney for Legal Aid in Texas and became vice president of UAW Local 2320, which includes Legal Aid lawyers. Region 9A Assistant Director is her latest political appointment, with a pay grade an order of magnitude higher than the paltry pay for Legal Aid attorneys. The placement of this pro-Fain organizer in the leadership of the union is part of longstanding efforts by the Democratic Party, the federal government and the courts to lean on the UAWD to present the UAW bureaucracy as "reformed" in the desperate hope this will endow it with a veneer of legitimacy in the eyes of workers. Regardless of whether Curry or Fain wins the election, the Democratic Party aims to deepen the connection between the state and the UAW apparatus.

The Curry and Fain campaigns spent the whole first round of the UAW election saying Will Lehman, a rank-and-file autoworker at Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania, "lacked experience." Evidently the bureaucracy values the "experience" of working in the White House and Labor Department but not the experience of working on the shop floor of an auto plant under a tiered system of pay without a pension.

There are many questions which remain about this appointment due to the vague, lawyerly wording of the UAWD's statement about the controversy. The statement claims the \$25,000 donation was not illegal and did not violate election rules, but if it is true that a UAW local official secured a high-level position in the leadership of the UAW through a large donation, this would constitute a serious violation of the consent decree, which was approved and overseen by a federal judge *in order to root out corruption and patronage from the UAW*.

Furthermore, the UAWD statement expresses confidence that the appointment will survive "any investigation" but does not indicate whether an investigation has begun, and if so, who is in charge of it and what information is coming out of it? If an investigation is happening in secret, it must be carried out before the rank and file which has the right to know.

The episode shows that those with wealth and power have easy access to the leadership of the UAW bureaucracy. This is what the corruption scandal revealed, after all. The corporations were able to grease the palms of the leadership to secure what they wanted, and this incident would seem to indicate the same practices continue today.

Meanwhile, the rank and file has no say in the UAW. Workers whose wages are declining in the face of spiraling inflation and who do not have \$25,000 to spend to buy influence within the UAW never see their committeemen. The extent of their interaction with the UAW apparatus is when the bureaucrats tell them "the company can do that" and "you're lucky to have a job."

The *World Socialist Web Site* reached out to Kohnert-Yount, Brandon Mancilla, Shawn Fain and Members United asking for clarification about exactly how the appointment took place. Fain has not responded to a request for clarification as to whether he was involved in the appointment or whether he discussed Kohnert-Yount's large contributions with Mancilla at the time.

Mancilla has not replied to a request to know what Kohnert-Yount's exact starting salary will be or whether he told Fain that she was a donor to his campaign. And Kohnert-Yount did not reply when asked whether she disclosed the \$25,000 donation during the application process. The *World Socialist Web Site* will continue to update the membership as more information comes to light.



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