Voting ends in UAW runoff election, with less than 13 percent of rank-and-file workers casting ballots

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Voting in the second round of the United Auto Workers presidential elections concluded on Tuesday afternoon. Ballot counting is set to begin today in Dayton, Ohio, with results expected to be released late this week or early next week. The outcome will determine whether incumbent UAW President Ray Curry or long-time UAW International representative Shawn Fain will obtain the top position in the UAW apparatus.

The corporate media is touting the election—the first direct membership vote in the union's history—as a sweeping democratic change for the UAW, which was placed under federal monitorship after nearly a dozen top officers, including two former presidents, were convicted for taking corporate bribes and embezzling dues money. But the conduct of the election itself has demonstrated that power in the UAW remains in the hands an entrenched leadership thoroughly hostile to the rank and file.

Perhaps the most significant fact about the second round is that it has been held before the results of the first round have even been certified, even though the uncertified count was released nearly three months ago. The court-appointed UAW Monitor has not certified the results as it has sat on a protest filed last December by Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, who won nearly 5,000 votes in the first round running as a socialist candidate.

The protest documents the fact that Curry and Fain were the two top vote getters in an election that was characterized by systematic voter suppression and the disenfranchisement of the rank and file.

This included the UAW bureaucracy's defying the Monitor's mandate to update membership lists so ballots would be mailed to the correct addresses and to widely publicize the election to maximize participation. As a result, less than 10 percent of the 1.1 million active and retired members eligible to vote cast ballots in the first round. In fact, more ballots were returned for incorrect addresses than those that were counted.

Once the field was narrowed to Curry and Fain—two trusted members of the UAW apparatus—union officials sought to increase the turnout by postering factories and union halls with signs about upcoming deadlines, and sending out emails and other information to remind workers to vote or how to get ballots if they hadn't received one.

This led to an increase in the votes cast in the second round, from 103,020 valid ballots to 141,548 by the Tuesday deadline, although the latter votes have not been validated. Despite the increase between the two rounds of voting, the turnout for the UAW election was still one of the lowest, if not the lowest, of any direct union election in history. Overall, less than 13 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the second round.

Many of the same problems from the first round—including incorrect addresses, failure to mail out replacement ballots in time, etc—still remained in the second. Given the extra effort by the UAW bureaucracy to get the vote out, however, the extremely low turnout reflects the mass alienation of workers from the UAW apparatus, with its two hand-picked candidates now the only options. This apparatus has spent decades colluding with the employers to destroy workers' living standards and working conditions.

Young workers stuck in temporary or second- and third-tier positions, older workers who have suffered decades of declining real wages, and pensioners struggling to pay their bills, know that a shuffling of positions at the top of the UAW apparatus will do nothing to improve their lives.

"Workers I talk to were upset with what happened in the election," a worker at the Forvia (formerly Faurecia) parts plant in Saline, Michigan told the WSWS. "They didn't hear about the first round, and they think it was an unfair election. It is hard to speak on what other people are feeling, but I believe a lot of people felt that way. Once a fraud, always a fraud. If they rigged the first round, they will rig the second."

She went on to compare Trump's attempt to overturn the

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federal election in 2020 to the UAW bureaucracy's effort to strip workers of their voting rights. "The democratic process is being thrown out the window, politically and in the plants," she said. "Look at the rail workers and the teachers. Their democratic rights were trampled on. You can see it every day. Everybody's complaining. They have laid off a lot. Our plant went from 2,000 workers down to 1,200 just since the start of COVID. None of us like it. Everybody's complaining."

While the Curry machine was able to increase the turnout at some key locals, like UAW Local 600 at the Ford Rouge Complex in Dearborn, Michigan, other efforts by both factions to boost the vote fell on deaf ears.

At UAW Local 140 at the Stellantis Warren Truck Plant in suburban Detroit, for example, where Shawn Fain won the first round, the vote only increased from 1,014 in the first round to 1,205 in the second. The 5,200 workers at the factory include hundreds, if not thousands, of temporary workers who pay union dues but get no profit-sharing checks or dental and optical benefits and can be fired at will.

At UAW Local 1268 at the Stellantis assembly plant in Belvidere, Illinois the turnout only increased by eight votes, from 1,114 to 1,122. Tuesday was the last day of work at the plant, which is being indefinitely "idled," without any resistance by the UAW bureaucracy.

Speaking as a mouthpiece for the UAW bureaucracy, the *Detroit Free Press* suggested that the marginally higher turnout in the second round somehow invalidated Will Lehman's campaign to defend the democratic rights of UAW members. Pointing to the vote total, the *Free Pres*s declared, "That's 32,825 more ballots returned already than during the election last year where criticism about the low level of participation prompted one candidate, Will Lehman, to file a federal lawsuit, which was later dismissed, seeking to extend the deadline."

The newspaper went on to falsely portray Fain and his UAW Members United Slate as militant opponents of the auto corporations, with a Wayne State University business and labor "expert" declaring, "regardless of the outcome, the dissidents have captured enough of the International Executive Board to affect greatly the 2023 bargaining and also to bring about a cultural change within the UAW."

In fact, Fain has no fundamental differences with Curry and has spent decades as a member of the UAW ruling Administrative Caucus endorsing one concessionary contract after another.

The fact that the court-appointed UAW Monitor has permitted this electoral farce to proceed only underscores the fact that the government oversight over the UAW was never aimed at giving rank-and-file workers real power. Instead, its goal has been to give a "democratic" facelift to the discredited UAW bureaucracy.

The Obama administration relied on the UAW in 2009 to halve the wages of new autoworkers and set a new lower pay scale for all manufacturing workers. The Justice Department only initiated its investigation into the well-known corruption of the UAW apparatus after Chrysler workers revolted in 2015 and defeated the first UAW-backed national contract in 33 years.

The Biden administration is desperately seeking to prop up the UAW apparatus—whether it headed by Curry or Fain—to beat back the growing resistance by the working class against the efforts to force workers to pay for the economic crisis of American capitalism and the increasing cost of the war preparations against Russia and China. After the steady rise of industrial struggles by UAW members over the last few years—at Volvo Trucks, John Deere, CNH and the University of California—2023 promises to be an even more explosive year, with the impending contract battle at Caterpillar and struggles later this year at GE Aerospace, at GM, Ford and Stellantis, and at Mack Trucks.

In a statement to the WSWS, Will Lehman said, "This entire election has been a travesty. The entrenched UAW bureaucracy, which never wanted a direct vote in the first place, did everything to prevent the full participation of the members because they knew they would vote them out. The miserable turnout in the second round, despite the efforts of the UAW bureaucracy to increase the vote, only demonstrates the deep alienation of workers from the UAW apparatus.

"But my campaign revealed that in every factory and in every workplace, there is the basis for building a powerful network of rank-and-file committees to mobilize the full power of the working class to improve our living standards, abolish all tiers and defend our jobs. My campaign to transfer decision-making power from the UAW apparatus to the workers on the shop floor now has to be expanded.

"We cannot afford to leave our struggles in the hands of the bureaucracy, whether it is led by Curry or Fain. In the fights ahead, at CAT, the Big Three, at Mack Trucks, we must organize the full power of workers in rank-and-file committees, which we have a meaningful, democratic control over, and link up our struggles with other sections of workers in the US and internationally."

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