

UAW runoff elections end in debacle for bureaucracy

Jerry White
7 March 2023

Initial vote-counting in the second round of the United Auto Workers (UAW) elections concluded over the weekend, with challenger Shawn Fain maintaining a narrow 645-vote lead over incumbent UAW President Ray Curry. It appears at this point that Fain may win, but 1,608 ballots are being challenged. Results are not expected until late this week or early next week.

There are number of significant facts about the election.

First, the second round of voting took place before the court-appointed UAW Monitor was able to certify the first round, which concluded in December 2022. This is because of the comprehensive protest filed by UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman to the Monitor, documenting a systematic campaign of voter suppression that resulted in less than 10 percent of the membership voting in the first round.

The Monitor has not even bothered to reply to the protest, even though the UAW deliberately defied the Monitor's own mandate to update membership mailing information and widely publicize the election to "ensure the enfranchisement of as many members as possible." Instead, it let this antidemocratic farce continue.

Second, the turnout in the runoff election was abysmal, despite efforts by the UAW apparatus to make the election more broadly known once the two chosen candidates of the apparatus were in a runoff. It took elementary measures, such as posting announcements and sending mailers to remind workers to vote, which it did not do in the first round. In the end, however, only 138,628 valid ballots were cast, less than 13 percent of the 1.1 million active and retired UAW members who were eligible to vote.

What explains this? The UAW apparatus and its two candidates for president have no genuine base of support within the working class. After decades of collaborating with the corporations and successive governments in the systematic destruction of workers' jobs, living standards and working conditions, the affluent upper-middle class executives who occupy the union's misnamed "Solidarity House" and its satellites are viewed with contempt by the

rank and file.

Whoever wins the election will have secured the votes of about 6 percent of the UAW membership. This, however, overstates the actual vote count. If one subtracts the more than 41,000 current and former union officials and their close hangers-on, the next UAW president will have won closer to 3 percent of the votes of rank-and-file workers.

The election was nothing but an ugly contest within the UAW apparatus itself. At stake was the distribution of highly paid positions and access to the union's more than \$1 billion in assets. If there are any differences between the long-standing Administrative Caucus and Fain's UAW Members United faction, they are only tactical—over how best to contain the growing rebellion of the rank and file against the UAW bureaucracy and the corporations.

Fain is a longtime operative in the UAW's bureaucratic apparatus and himself a former member of the Administrative Caucus. He worked his way up from a local union position at a Chrysler casting plant in Kokomo, Indiana in 2001 to become a top staffer at "Solidarity House" for the last 11 years. As a member of the UAW-Chrysler National Negotiating Committee, Fain backed the savage attacks on workers' wages and conditions in 2009 and 2011 before being appointed assistant director of the UAW-Fiat Chrysler Department in 2015. The department would later be called the center of the "culture of corruption" in the UAW, when federal prosecutors indicted Fain's boss, Norwood Jewell, in 2019 for taking company bribes in exchange for signing and enforcing pro-company contracts.

Since November 2017, Fain has been co-director of the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center in Detroit, and more recently he has become a leading voice in the union bureaucracy's efforts to claim that the corruption in the UAW only involved a "few bad apples." As the WSWs has pointed out, the only thing that would significantly change if he were elected is that Fain would increase his current salary of \$156,364 as an "administrative assistant" to the nearly \$300,000 that a UAW president pockets.

The US government investigation into the decades-long corruption in the UAW—which the Obama administration only initiated after Chrysler workers revolted in 2015 and overwhelmingly rejected a UAW-backed national contract for the first time in three decades—was never aimed at empowering rank-and-file workers. Instead, it was designed to give the bureaucracy a “democratic” facelift so that it could maintain its grip over the workers and continue to impose the dictates of the corporations and the government.

Fain and members of his slate have been backed by the Democratic Socialists of America and *Labor Notes*. These pseudo-left organizations, representing affluent layers of the upper-middle class and sections of the union officialdom, function within the Democratic Party and play a critical role in its effort to shore up the tattered credibility of the union apparatuses.

But the outcome of the vote exposes the fact that no section of the bureaucracy is supported by workers, and the whole institution lacks any legitimacy. This is a debacle for the Biden administration, which is relying on the UAW apparatus to control the mounting insurgency of the working class against soaring inflation and intolerable working conditions. This upsurge of workers threatens to upend the decades-long suppression of wages, which has been key to the enrichment of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

Most importantly, the American ruling class needs the unions to impose “labor discipline” as it gears up for all-out war with Russia and China. In a guest column appearing in the *New York Times* last week, Australian war planner Ross Babbage, a senior fellow of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington D.C., said the outbreak of a major war with China—which “is probably more likely now than at any other time since World War II”—would require the imposition of unprecedented sacrifices on American workers.

This would include emergency rationing and a surge of inflation and unemployment, Babbage writes, “especially in the period in which the economy is being repurposed for the war effort, which might include some automobile manufacturers switching to building aircraft or food-processing companies converting to production of priority pharmaceuticals.” To prepare for war, Babbage insists, critical supply chains must be relocated to the US and allied nations, and America must “restore its dominance in global manufacturing.”

After using the union bureaucracies to block strikes at the oil refineries, ports and railroads last year, the White House is further integrating them into the structure of the state as it prepares to convert to a wartime economy. This includes Biden’s appointment last week of Ray Curry to a key position on the President’s Export Council. This body,

which consists of the heads of major US corporations and officials from virtually every government agency, including the heads of the Department of Homeland Security and the National Security Council, is tasked with “export expansion” as the US escalates its trade and military conflict with China.

Opposition in the working class is growing against demands for ever-greater sacrifice. The election is concluding as the UAW tries to push through a contract at Caterpillar that would mean a 20 percent or more decline in real wages for 7,000 workers over the life of the proposed six-year contract. The UAW is also facing an explosion of anger over the mass firings of workers at auto parts supplier Dana, which were carried out with the complicity of the union bureaucracy.

This year will see major class battles among workers in the UAW and other sections of the working class in the US and internationally, including more than 170,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the US and Canada.

The central issue raised by the campaign of Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman was the need to transfer decision-making power from the UAW apparatus to the workers on the shop floor through the construction of a network of rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace. Running as a socialist and fighter for the international unity of the working class, Lehman won nearly 5,000 votes from workers across the US. This demonstrates that there is a powerful foundation for unifying the struggles of workers against capitalist exploitation through the building and expansion of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact