

Fear of rank-and-file rebellion looms on last day of UAW convention

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The United Auto Workers 2023 Special Bargaining Convention in Detroit concluded Wednesday with calls for “unity” and “solidarity” by the contending cliques inside the UAW apparatus. After the bitter fight for control of the union’s positions and assets, newly elected UAW President Shawn Fain and several of his former opponents declared it was necessary to close ranks. While they suggested this was because they needed a united front to fight the auto companies, the common enemy they all fear is an increasingly militant and self-assertive rank and file.

New information continues to emerge underscoring the anti-democratic character of the national union elections which brought Fain and the current UAW leadership into office. Also on Wednesday, Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and candidate for president in the 2022 UAW elections, filed a complaint with the Department of Labor demanding a re-run of the elections. The document details how hundreds of thousands of UAW members did not receive notice of the UAW elections. Significantly, the complaint also provides evidence of the close ties between the auto companies and the law firms which comprise the UAW Monitor, which was tasked with overseeing the elections.

The final day of the bargaining convention featured the remarks of UAW Vice President Chuck Browning, who ran on the slate of Fain’s opponent, former UAW President Ray Curry.

‘I hear worries we’re going to be a divided house going into negotiations, but that’s not true,’ Browning said. ‘Let’s support our President and International Executive Board.’ He continued demagogically, ‘let the world hear, we’re united when it comes to our enemies and our bargaining. We’re sticking together and taking on the boss.’

Browning, the head of the union’s agricultural implement and Ford departments, then gave a lying account of the 2021 John Deere strike, claiming that the UAW “ran the negotiations in the most democratic manner possible.”

In reality, the UAW apparatus brought back one pro-company agreement after another at Deere, repeatedly

trampling workers’ democratic rights. Browning was unable to explain Wednesday how he and the bureaucracy “negotiated” an initial tentative agreement in October 2021 which was so overwhelmingly hated by workers that it was voted down by a 90 percent margin. Browning, then-President Ray Curry, and other top UAW officials had championed the deal, with Browning himself claiming it contained “substantial hard-fought gains and protections.”

Feeling it had no choice but to call a walkout given the level of opposition among workers, the UAW bureaucracy proceeded to starve workers throughout the six-week strike on just \$275 a week from the UAW’s strike fund. During this time, Browning continued to receive his full \$207,000 annual pay package.

Throughout the strike, the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee was the only organized force among workers fighting to defend the rights of the rank and file against the apparatus. In statements that were read by thousands of workers, the rank-and-file committee called for workers’ oversight over contract talks, the payment of workers’ full income out of the union’s gigantic strike fund, and the expansion of the walkout to other sections of workers in the US and internationally.

The UAW apparatus continued to bring back tentative agreements that were far from workers’ demands for massive wage increases, health coverage for retirees, and the restoration of previous concessions. A second UAW-backed deal, little changed from the first, was again voted down by workers a few weeks later.

Determined to prevent the Deere strike from spreading, the UAW launched an all-out campaign to ram through the company’s “last, best and final” offer, which Solidarity House admitted contained only “modest modifications” from the contract workers had just voted to reject. UAW officials bullied and threatened workers, saying Deere would hire replacements and unilaterally impose its terms if the contract was again voted down. In the most brazen example of the efforts to coerce a “yes” vote, the elections chair at UAW Local 281 in Davenport, Iowa, declared on Facebook

that he would use his position in the plant as an inspector to make life difficult for those advocating against the contract.

“Let’s just say that they were not behind us,” a veteran Deere worker at the Milan Parts Distribution Center told the *World Socialist Web Site* after watching Browning’s speech. “They wanted us to approve the first contract. He sits up there and gets emotional, for what? He’s a liar.”

“Did he mean to say ‘autocratic’?” added a Deere retiree in Ottumwa, Iowa, scoffing at Browning’s claims about the “democratic” negotiating process. “His leadership was full of misinformation and lies meant to lessen the workers’ demands.”

In a less-guarded moment, Browning let loose what he and the rest of the UAW bureaucracy thought of the rebellion by the Deere workers. “When that membership knocked that first agreement down, there was a choice: We could take the same agreement back or say we tried out best. But we collectively decided we were going to ride that serpent and see where it took us.”

Browning’s choice of words is revealing. In the eyes of the UAW bureaucracy, the rank and file are indeed a massive monster whose fight for decent wages and working conditions threatens to bring down the entire corrupt edifice of the UAW apparatus.

Fain welcomed “brother Browning” to the podium and has never said a word about the sellout of the Deere workers, or Browning’s subsequent betrayal of the eight-month CNH strike and the concessions contract just imposed on Caterpillar workers. On the contrary, Browning will now lead the Ford “negotiations” under Fain’s “new UAW.”

Over the first two days of the convention, every resolution put forward by Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD)—the faction backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) that backed Fain’s “Members United” slate—was defeated or blocked from coming up for a vote. These included proposals to go on record supporting COLA (Cost of Living Adjustments) and to reject management efforts to establish separate, inferior wage and benefit tiers for workers at Big Three or joint venture electric vehicle assembly and battery plants.

As a sop to the UAWD, however, on Wednesday the delegates approved a resolution which urged the UAW to include language in its contracts allowing members to respect picket lines and not be required to enter buildings to work when other workers in those buildings are engaged in a strike or a lockout.

According to the UAWD, however, “At the advice of legal counsel, an amendment was made to the resolution to remove the following language from the amendment: “and not be required to handle parts from facilities that are engaged in a strike or a lockout.”

The repeated defeats of their resolutions did not stop the UAWD from issuing a groveling leaflet Wednesday, thanking the assembled bureaucrats for the “spirited debate and renewal of democratic participation in the union.” It continued, “Now we return home to the true fight: taking on our employers and especially the Big Three this fall through a robust contract campaign.”

The election of Fain has brought members of the DSA and other pseudo-left organizations into leadership positions in the UAW bureaucracy.

Fain’s transition team is being led by Chris Brooks, a long-time staff writer for *Labor Notes* and the current communications director of the Communications Workers of America (CWA)-aligned NewsGuild in New York City. A leaked document from the transition team says that Fain will have to contend with the “unreasonable expectations” of the 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers whose contracts expire this summer. To divert opposition into safe channels, Fain’s camp is preparing to conduct a “contract campaign,” including rallies with Bernie Sanders, Teamsters President Sean O’Brien and DSA leader and Association of Flight Attendants President Sara Nelson, with the aim of providing a “left” cover while he prepares another sellout.

The UAW bureaucracy has its plans, but rank-and-file workers have theirs. On the eve of the convention, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) held a meeting attended in Detroit and online by delegates from rank-and-file committees in the auto and heavy equipment industries, as well as teachers and other sections of the working class. Workers from committees at GM, Stellantis, auto parts makers Dana and Forvia (formerly Faurecia), Mack Trucks and Caterpillar resolved to affiliate with the IWA-RFC and to establish a steering committee to guide the development of a network of autoworkers’ rank-and-file committees in advance of the major battles workers will confront this year.



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