Jacobin, DSA promote fraud of “reformed” UAW administration after bargaining convention

Marcus Day
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With the recent accession of Shawn Fain and his “Members United” slate into the leadership of the pro-corporate United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations are falsely heralding a transformed UAW, characterized by “democracy, militancy, and an end to corruption.” Nothing of the sort has taken place.

Last week, the UAW held its 2023 Special Bargaining Convention in Detroit, ostensibly to outline the union’s negotiating position heading into this year’s contract talks for 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers.

In reality, the event was the scene of desperate pleas for “unity” on the part of the UAW’s new administration, directed not at workers, but at the incoming regime’s factional rivals within the pro-corporate union bureaucracy. Meanwhile, looming large for all the assembled bureaucrat-delegates was the fear of an impending revolt by rank-and-file workers as the Big Three contracts approach, driven by anger over a surging cost-of-living crisis and decades of UAW-enforced concessions.

Fain’s administration has already made clear its intentions to combat workers’ “unreasonable expectations” in a leaked transition memo in March. Throughout the convention, Fain’s camp made repeated overtures to the “old guard” of the reactionary union apparatus, hoping to close ranks in preparation to impose a brutal new round of job cuts and concessions being demanded by the automakers.

Just one day before the convention began, Fain was sworn into office as UAW president. A decades-long fixture in the union apparatus, Fain ran as the head of the “Members United” slate, which was backed by the “Unite All Workers for Democracy” (UAWD) caucus. Both Members United and UAWD are dominated by mid-level UAW bureaucrats, particularly those grouped around the publication *Labor Notes* and the DSA, which is a faction of the Democratic Party. Fain’s lead strategist, for example, Chris Brooks, is a former staff writer for *Labor Notes.*

The DSA, into which *Labor Notes* and UAWD have substantially integrated themselves, is functioning as the PR department for the new UAW administration, whose candidates they promoted and campaigned for during the elections. The DSA is now doubling down on its efforts to provide a counterfeit “left” cover for the nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective which Fain, the UAWD, the UAW bureaucracy and the DSA all base themselves on.

Jacobin covers up fraudulent character of UAW elections

On March 31, the DSA’s de facto house publication *Jacobin Magazine* published a dishonest portrait of the UAW convention and the Fain administration. Titled “Can the UAW rise again?” and written by *Jacobin* staff writer Alex Press, the piece echoes the kind of lying “embedded journalism” in which the American media have become experts. In contrast to the *World Socialist Web Site*—which the new “democratic” UAW administration banned from reporting from inside the convention without explanation—Press and *Jacobin* were given seemingly unlimited access to speak to Fain and other top UAW officers, and allowed to roam the event, including UAWD caucus meetings.

“Members recently elected a new leadership promising democracy, militancy, and an end to corruption,” Press begins. “But change isn’t coming easy to the UAW.”

Later, she states, “Fain’s victory was nail-bitingly close, and turnout was dismally low. But the reformers’ sweep is a mandate for those who want to return the UAW to its former outsized role.”

In fact, the UAW’s 2022-23 national elections, as rank-and-file candidate and Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman has documented, were fundamentally marred by widespread disenfranchisement of workers and suppression of the vote by the UAW bureaucracy, as well as conflicts of interest on the part of the UAW Monitor tasked with overseeing the elections.

Days before the convention, Fain was declared the winner in a runoff election against incumbent Ray Curry by a margin of just 483 votes. As Lehman has pointed out, Fain received just 6 percent of votes of the more than one million eligible active and retired members. And a substantial portion of these votes came from sections of the bureaucracy itself.

Will Lehman has formally challenged the results of the elections, adamantly opposing the bureaucracy’s efforts to trample workers’ democratic rights.

In a complaint filed with the Department of Labor just last week, Lehman reviewed evidence that the UAW apparatus deliberately failed to provide adequate notice to workers of the elections or update its membership database (the “Local Union Information System,” or LUIS), thereby preventing many workers from receiving their ballots. Turnout in the first round of the elections was barely over 9 percent, the lowest ever for a national union election in the US, and was little higher in the runoff, roughly 13 percent.

In addition, Lehman detailed the intimate ties to the auto corporations on the part of the law firms—Jenner & Block and Crowell & Moring—which comprise the UAW Monitor. The firms have long maintained a revolving-door relationship with GM and other major auto companies, serving as their legal representation in product liability suits and advising them on labor disputes.

In order to ensure workers’ democratic right to vote is respected, Lehman has demanded that the UAW elections be rerun, and that this time all eligible members be given actual notice.

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Press passes over all of this in silence, in line with the policy of *Jacobin* and the DSA throughout the elections of blacking out any information about the campaign of Will Lehman, the only socialist candidate for UAW president. Nor does she attempt to reconcile the obvious contradiction between her description of a "nail-bitingly" close result and her claim of any "mandate" for Fain's administration.

Preparing the ground for the next sellout

In attempting to promote the supposedly "reformed" character of the UAW, the *Jacobin* article, as well as a similar report in *Labor Notes* ("Auto Workers Convention Lurches Towards Reversing Concessions"), find themselves in a conundrum. On the one hand, they attempt to paint the convention as "unprecedentedly democratic." On the other, they are forced to admit that delegates at the convention, themselves predominantly longtime bureaucrats, blocked virtually every resolution put forward by UAWD, even though they were largely rhetorical and would have done nothing to fundamentally change the policies of the apparatus.

Perhaps most revealingly, delegates voted by nearly two-to-one to reject a resolution on COLA (cost-of-living adjustment raises) on the first day of the convention, despite the demand's overwhelming popularity among workers facing skyrocketing prices for basic necessities. Later, the convention blocked UAWD resolutions calling for the UAW to state its opposition to tier divisions between assembly and electric vehicle battery workers, or to endorse sectoral bargaining in higher education, or to make "effective strike preparation."

Both *Jacobin* and *Labor Notes* bury these essential facts in their reporting on the convention. When they do mention them, they attempt to diminish their significance by pointing to the passage of a resolution which states that the UAW will attempt to bargain for contract language allowing workers to respect the picket lines of other unions. Neither publication mentions, however, that UAWD willingly removed language from its resolution which also called for workers to "not be required to handle parts from facilities that are engaged in a strike or a lockout."

The Democratic Party strategists and spin doctors at *Jacobin* are already testing out their apologetic justifications for the sellouts which they know Fain and the UAW apparatus are preparing.

Press states that there are "possibilities for a fighting, democratic unionism free of corruption under Fain's leadership." However, she continues, "it's easier to change a union president than it is to change a union culture — particularly one in which corruption has been the norm and internal democracy has been all but nonexistent. And if the UAW bargaining convention this week is any indication, the union reformers have a long road ahead of them."

Jacobin's argument is defeatist and self-serving. Any blame for the failure of Fain and UAWD to make good on its campaign promises, the narrative goes, should be pinned solely on an abstract "union culture." But the article is unable to provide any serious explanation of how rampant corruption and the suppression of anything resembling union democracy in the UAW came about.

The UAW's corruption scandal is not the cause, but rather the symptom of the transformation of the union apparatus into an appendage of management. (Tellingly, while Press refers to the embezzlement of workers' dues by former top UAW officials, she says nothing about their bribery by Fiat Chrysler in return for "company friendly" agreements, as the federal investigation documented.)

Wedded to a nationalist and pro-capitalist program, the UAW and other union bureaucracies had no progressive response to the development of globalization in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the ensuing ruling class counteroffensive. Instead, they integrated themselves more and more into the structures of corporate management, as epitomized in 1979, when then-UAW President Douglas Fraser joined Chrysler's board of directors and forced through the first-ever wage and benefit concessions in the auto industry.

By the early 1980s, the UAW apparatus had explicitly adopted the program of "corporatism," the false and reactionary conception that there is no conflict between the profit interests of the corporations and the class interests of workers. This program went hand in hand with a virulent nationalist and chauvinist perspective, which asserted that workers in other countries were to blame for job losses, and that workers in the US had to sacrifice so that "their" corporate masters could remain competitive against their rivals overseas.

The union bureaucracy effectively severed any connection between its interests and the living standards of the workers it claimed to represent, relying increasingly on the direct infusions of billions of dollars of corporate cash through various "joint labor-management" programs.

From 1979 to today, the UAW apparatus oversaw the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and countless plant closures, but has maintained relatively stable assets of over $1 billion. While new autoworkers had their wages slashed in half and benefits shredded in 2009 at the behest of the Obama administration, the salaries of those on the UAW International staff have ballooned, with hundreds of bureaucrats making six-figure incomes, and enjoying upper-middle class lifestyles.

Jacobin is silent on this process, because it exposes as absurd and utopian any program which claims that the UAW apparatus can be changed by exchanging a few figures at the top.

Instead, the article presents a distorted record of the UAWD and its predecessors—Autoworkers Caravan and the earlier "New Directions"—seeking to present the present Fain administration as the latest in a long line of dogged union "reformers."

In fact, the record of these previous movements further exposes the reactionary character of this latest rendition. Like Fain, New Directions leaders like Jerry Tucker shared the same nationalist and pro-capitalist outlook of the ruling caucus in the UAW bureaucracy, along with its subordination of workers to the Democratic Party. In the end, its elected leaders, including UAW Local 599 President Dave Yettaw in Flint, bowed to GM's demands to close factories and destroy tens of thousands of jobs.

The Autoworker Caravan, led by pseudo-left local union officials like Wendy Thompson and Frank Hammer, told workers that President Obama and the Congressional Democrats would be relied on to protect workers during the 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler. This paved the way for the Democrats, with the backing of the UAW, to wipe out thousands of jobs, eliminate COLA and the eight-hour day, vastly expand temporary labor and halve the wages of all new hires.

Fain is a career bureaucrat heading up a gargantuan apparatus which is bitterly hostile to workers' interests. Contrary to his rhetoric, he will acquiesce to the automakers' orders for concessions and job cuts no less than his predecessors. Not surprisingly, neither *Jacobin* nor *Labor Notes* point to Fain's role in supporting massive concessions in the auto industry as a member of the UAW-Chrysler bargaining team in 2009.

"It was hard to swallow the cuts, but we have to preserve jobs and the future," Fain pathetically told the *Kokomo Tribune* at the time. "We're not happy about it, but you have to do what you have to do."

DSA, UAW work to subordinate workers to the Democratic Party

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While expending thousands of words on the convention and the UAW, the *Jacobin* article is also significant for what it does *not* say. Press ignores—or more precisely, covers up—an essential element of the convention which illustrates the continuity between Fain/UAWD and Ray Curry and the Administration Caucus: the promotion of the capitalist Democratic Party and the attempt to subordinate workers to it.

Nowhere in their convention coverage do *Jacobin* or *Labor Notes* mention the presence of figures such as Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer or Democratic Michigan Senators Debbie Stabenow and Gary Peters, nor their celebration by Fain and the assembled delegates.

This is no accident. Acknowledging the prominent participation at the convention of leading Democratic Party officials closely tied to the auto industry would cut across *Jacobin*'s efforts to present the UAW's new administration as preparing a "no holds barred" struggle against the corporations. Moreover, *Jacobin* likely recognizes that the establishment Democratic Party politicians promoted by the UAW include those whose campaigns are funded by the auto industry, a fact they wish to avoid bringing to workers' attention.

The DSA is itself a faction of the Democratic Party. Its representatives in Congress, comprising the "Squad," have repeatedly demonstrated their hostility to the interests of the working class in their actions over the past year. DSA members voted to ban strike action and impose a rail contract which workers had been widely rejecting. Meanwhile, DSA members have repeatedly voted to fund the US-NATO conflict with Russia in Ukraine, providing tens of billions of dollars in arms and military aid to the Ukrainian regime, risking the escalation toward a nuclear third world war.

There is nothing "socialist" about the DSA. It represents and is largely comprised of affluent layers of the upper-middle class, including a not insignificant number of highly paid union officials. The aim of these layers is not the socialist transformation of society, but rather the reshuffling of wealth within the top 10 or 5 percent of income earners.

Under conditions of capitalism's unprecedented social, political and economic crisis, the DSA, like its counterparts in other countries, is increasingly being called upon to give a "left" facelift to the Democratic Party and its allies in the union bureaucracies, which are viewed with increasing hostility and disgust by wide sections of the working class and young people.

At the same time, the DSA works to inject racial, gender and identity politics into the working class, in an effort to divide workers and prevent their unification around their common class interests. The reactionary deployment of identity politics is particularly evident within the activities of the UAWD-DSA members within academia, who have spearheaded a witch-hunt against Harvard Professor John Comaroff, on the basis of fraudulent accusations of sexual misconduct.

Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees

The ruling class is well aware that a colossal social explosion is building up in the working class internationally, with anger pent up over impossible living and working conditions and grotesque levels of inequality. The Biden administration in particular has relied heavily on the union bureaucracies to block or isolate strikes and impose below-inflation wage increases. But this strategy has produced diminishing returns, with workers in a series of contract struggles—at Volvo Trucks, John Deere, and elsewhere—rebelling against the concessionary agreements backed by union executives.

Thus, the White House and the DSA are coordinating their efforts to rehabilitate the flagging credibility of the unions. This is particularly the case at the UAW, which will oversee the contract talks for over 150,000 autoworkers at the Big Three this year. A similar effort is underway in the Teamsters, whose contract for hundreds of thousands of UPS workers expires this year, and whose recently elected president, Sean O'Brien, is similarly and falsely being held up as a "reformer" and "militant" by the pseudo-left.

Workers are on a collision course with these so-called union "reformists," who, far from offering piecemeal reforms, will have nothing to offer but a savage program of mass layoffs and attacks on wages and working conditions ordered by the capitalist ruling class.

To lead and organize the struggles which are on the horizon, workers have begun to build a network of rank-and-file committees at General Motors, Stellantis, Dana, Caterpillar, and elsewhere, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The day before the UAW Bargaining Convention began, delegates from rank-and-file committees met in Detroit and online, outlining a strategy which is the polar opposite of that which is being peddled by *Jacobin* and the DSA: fighting to abolish the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy entirely, transferring power to workers on the shop floor, and preparing an international counteroffensive of the working class.

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