

DSA leaders of U-M grad students' strike promote top UAW sellouts Shawn Fain and Bob King

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14 April 2023

Some 1,300 graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan are approaching the fourth week of their determined strike for a living wage. The student workers are members of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), which, as Local 3550, is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Since the U-M grad students walked out on March 29, demanding a 60 percent increase over their poverty wage of \$24,000 a year, plus other benefits, they have been joined by nearly 10,000 grad student instructors, faculty and staff at campuses in three other states: 9,000 faculty and grad students at Rutgers University in New Jersey, plus 450 faculty and staff at Eastern Illinois University, 100 faculty and staff at Chicago State University and 260 faculty and staff at Governor's State University in Illinois, and 62 custodians, groundskeepers, and movers at the Rhode Island School of Design.

All of the workers in all four states share common conditions of low pay and overwork; the vast majority are members of AFT-affiliated campus unions; and all four states are controlled by the Democratic Party, which is overseeing the strikebreaking efforts and resistance to a living wage by university administrators. All of the striking workers face the deliberate isolation of their struggles by the AFT bureaucracy, led by multimillionaire Randi Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee and staunch supporter of the US-led proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The powerful wave of campus strikes is part of a resurgence of working class struggles internationally—with mass strikes and protests involving tens of thousands of students as well as workers against President Macron in France, mass strikes in Britain, Germany, Portugal, Greece and other European countries, and ongoing strikes and protests in Sri Lanka following last year's strike wave that brought down the government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

The outbreak of the campus strikes in New Jersey and Illinois threatens to break through the isolation imposed by the AFT bureaucracy and its local enforcers, aimed at creating the conditions to impose new sellout contracts on student instructors and part-time and non-tenured faculty, who, in the tens of thousands, have gone on strike over the past several years across the US.

This makes all the more sinister the promotion by the GEO leadership at U-M, dominated by the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), of the phony "reform" wing of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy headed by newly installed UAW president Shawn Fain, as well as former UAW president and current lecturer at U-M's Residential College Bob King, a member of the AFT-affiliated Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO) at the university.

The DSA, which is being elevated into the top echelons of both the discredited, pro-corporate and pro-war trade union bureaucracies and the

increasingly discredited Democratic Party, represents privileged layers of the middle class. It is neither socialist nor genuinely democratic. It is a faction of the capitalist and imperialist Democratic Party. Its central function, along with the rest of the union apparatus, is to block the independent mobilization of the vast social power and potential political power of the working class and channel opposition behind the Democrats.

In promoting figures such as Fain and King, the GEO leaders in and around the DSA conceal the treacherous role of the UAW in one campus strike after another over the past several years where the UAW was the bargaining agent. The list of betrayed strikes and sellout contracts includes Columbia University, New York University, the New School and last year's six-week strike by 48,000 academic workers at the University of California.

GEO Facebook posts video by King

On March 26, the official Facebook and Instagram page of the GEO posted a video message from King in which the former UAW leader said, "Management needs to stop screwing around... I know the UAW members are behind you, will be behind you. Keep fighting. You're going to win a great contract."

The GEO commented that the "former UAW president... knows our demands are reasonable and should be met."

In fact, King has said or done nothing to bring his union, the LEO, out on strike with the grad student instructors, let alone mobilize support from autoworkers.

GEO Twitter account posts letter from UAW President Fain

On March 30, the official Twitter account of the GEO posted a letter from Shawn Fain on UAW stationery addressed to University of Michigan President Santa Ono and other university officials, declaring the UAW's support for the GEO strike.

The letter stated, in part:

Just as with our locals in the University of California system, Columbia University, New York University, and elsewhere, GEO

is fighting for changes that would significantly improve learning outcomes across campus by making graduate workers safe and secure in their jobs.

By posting the letter, the GEO leadership not only dishonestly implied that the UAW had secured good contracts for these sections of university workers, it held up Fain and the new UAW leadership as a model of “militant” unionism to be followed by the GEO strikers. The GEO appended to the post the following obsequious comment:

Today @UAW President Shawn Fain wrote to President Ono, Provost McCauley, and the Regents to support our demands for a living wage and a fair contract! We are humbled to have you alongside us in this fight!

The very fact that in his pro-forma letter Fain endorsed the betrayals of the noted campus strikes explodes the fiction that he represents a “new UAW” and will pursue a different policy from the corporatist program of endless give-backs and concessions that has destroyed all of the gains previously made by autoworkers in generations of struggle.

There are tens of thousands of education workers who are members of the UAW and who would undoubtedly support the strike at the University of Michigan. The overwhelming majority of the hundreds of thousands of active and retired members of the UAW would support the strike as well. But despite Fain’s letter, the UAW has done nothing to publicize the strike or even inform its members that the strike is taking place, let alone mobilize UAW members to join it and secure the workers’ demands.

UAW silence on the GEO strike

GEO pickets were set up March 29, the same day the UAW Special Bargaining Convention in Detroit, a thirty-minute drive from the Ann Arbor campus, concluded. The new president could have easily promoted the U-M workers’ struggle at that event, attended by local union bureaucrats from across the US, but Fain did not even mention it. In fact, there has not been a single reference to the GEO strike on either the UAW website, the union’s Twitter account or its Facebook page since the strike began.

Instead, Fain repeatedly sought to make amends with the faction of bureaucrats aligned with Ray Curry, the president he had ousted. The convention charted a course of treachery in the upcoming contract negotiations with the US-based auto companies covering 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers. It rejected even the most mild resolutions calling for strike solidarity and the restoration of cost-of-living pay adjustments, and proposed nothing to fight the companies’ plans for mass layoffs and further wage cuts as they transition to electric vehicles.

At the convention, Fain paraded top Michigan Democratic politicians before the delegates to underscore the bureaucracy’s support for Biden’s program of war, bank bailouts and austerity. Among those who attended the convention was Governor Gretchen Whitmer, whose party controls both houses of the state legislature and whose administration is overseeing the U-M administration’s adamant rejection of the demand for a living wage. Whitmer’s main claim to fame is the allocation of billions of dollars in tax abatements and subsidies to auto companies and other business interests across the state.

The fraudulent UAW election

The election that brought Fain to the head of the UAW was organized by the US Labor Department to provide a facelift to the union in the aftermath of a years-long corruption scandal, which has seen a dozen top officers, including two past presidents, convicted and sent to prison for embezzling union funds and taking payoffs from the corporations in return for imposing company-friendly contracts on the membership.

The election for president and other top officers—the first-ever direct election in the UAW’s history—was a complete fraud. The recorded percentage of eligible UAW voters who returned ballots was the lowest of any previous national union election in the history of the United States.

In the first round of the election, less than 10 percent of the 1.1 million eligible active and retired UAW members cast valid ballots. Among the 48,000 University of California strikers, only 1,200 ballots were cast, or just 2.5 percent.

This was not due to rank-and-file “apathy.” It was the result of the deliberate suppression of the vote by all factions of the UAW bureaucracy, which sought to confine the turnout to the thousands of UAW apparatchiks. The vast majority of UAW members, including on the campuses, were not even aware that an election was taking place, because the national and local union officials did next to nothing to inform them and the government-appointed election monitor refused to compel the union officials to ensure that all workers received ballots.

The second round runoff ballot between Curry and Fain, which the union publicized more extensively, aroused a vote of only 13 percent of eligible members, reflecting both a lack of knowledge of the election and hatred for both factions of the union apparatus.

The Will Lehman campaign

Will Lehman, a rank-and-file tier-two worker at the Mack Trucks plant in Pennsylvania, ran in the election as a socialist and principled opponent of the entire union bureaucracy. He advocated the abolition of the bureaucracy and return of power to the rank-and-file workers on the shop floor. He advanced the fight to build a network of rank-and-file committees nationally and internationally to coordinate and unite the struggles of workers globally against global capitalism.

Lehman fought for the democratic rights of the UAW membership, filing a court suit to extend the first round and ensure that all members were sent ballots and assisted in casting them. He then filed complaints with the election monitor and the Labor Department demanding that the entire election be rerun on a democratic basis and exposing the election monitor’s longstanding business connections to the Big Three auto companies.

Both Fain and Curry, as well as the monitor and the Biden Labor Department, opposed Lehman’s complaints, underscoring their common contempt for the rights of the rank-and-file.

Despite the mass suppression of the vote, Lehman won nearly 5 percent of the ballots cast and counted in the first round, demonstrating the broad support for a fight against the entire union apparatus and a growing interest in socialism. In the end, Fain was elected with the support of less than 3 percent of the rank-and-file members of the union.

Who is Shawn Fain?

Shawn Fain has spent the past 20 years working his way up the bureaucratic ladder, first as Local 1166 shop chairman at Stellantis' Kokomo Casting Plant, and then, for the last 10 years, as an international rep at the union's "Solidarity House" national headquarters in Detroit.

Selected by Bob King in 2009 to serve on the UAW-Chrysler National Negotiating Committee, Fain endorsed the savage cuts imposed by Obama's Auto Task Force. These included reducing the wages of all new-hires by 50 percent, eliminating COLA (the cost-of-living adjustment), expanding the use of temporary part-time employees and laying off thousands of workers.

By the time the 2015 negotiations rolled around, Fain had been promoted to assistant director of the UAW-Fiat Chrysler Department. His boss, Norwood Jewell, was convicted of taking millions in company bribes for signing and enforcing pro-company contracts. Fain claims he had no idea what was going on in the department he helped run.

In 2015, Chrysler workers shot down another concessions contract by a 2-to-1 margin, in the first rejection of a UAW-backed national contract since 1982. The UAW rolled out its full bureaucratic machine to force through a refurbished deal several weeks later.

There is no public record of any opposition from Fain to this criminal conspiracy. Instead, over the next few years he was rewarded with an "administrative assistant" position on the Solidarity House staff. In November 2017, he was appointed as co-director of the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center in Detroit, where union officials regularly used company-issued credit cards to pay for their luxurious lifestyles.

Who is Bob King?

Bob King, first as head of the UAW's Ford department and then as UAW president, arguably played a greater personal role than any of his sellout predecessors or successors in the destruction of all remaining gains made by generations of autoworkers since the sit-down strikes of the 1930s.

King negotiated contracts that enabled Ford to cut 40 percent of its workforce between 2005 and 2007. In 2007, he led the team that renegotiated the UAW's four-year contract with Ford, establishing the two-tier wage system, including a \$14-an-hour wage for new-hires, and shifting \$22 billion in retiree health care obligations from the company to a union-run voluntary employee beneficiary association (VEBA).

In 2009, King led the UAW team in negotiating a tentative agreement that included more onerous concessions and pay cuts. It also allowed Ford to make up to 50 percent of its payment into the VEBA with common stock in lieu of cash. This made the UAW bureaucracy a major shareholder in the company, with a direct financial stake in cutting wages and benefits, ending the eight-hour day and increasing exploitation in order to boost Ford's profits and increase its stock price.

UAW members at Ford rejected the deal 70 percent to 30 percent, but then-President Ron Gettelfinger imposed the contract by invoking an arcane provision of the UAW constitution. King succeeded Gettelfinger as UAW president in 2010, and spent his four-year term imposing the brutal terms of Obama's Auto Task Force. He was succeeded by Dennis Williams, who was later jailed as a result of the government's corruption investigation.

King burnished his credentials as a pawn of the corporations at a 2010 Center for Automotive Research conference in Traverse City, Michigan. He all but boasted that under Obama "UAW members took wage cuts of \$7,000 to \$30,000 a year," that "benefits were also reduced significantly," and that "restructuring resulted in the loss of nearly 200,000 jobs."

Laying out shamelessly the corporatist dogma that denies that workers

have any interests distinct from those of the bosses, he declared: "The 21st century UAW no longer views these managements as our adversaries or enemies, but as partners in innovation and quality. Our new relationships with these employers are built upon a foundation of respect, shared goals, and a common mission."

He stressed the utility of the UAW in policing the workers and imposing layoffs and wage cuts, noting that the union had taken "a strong proactive role in making sure that quality did not suffer from the workforce reductions and churning."

These then are the figures and the union apparatus being presented by the DSA leadership of the GEO to the grad student instructors as genuine supporters of their struggle. This is no wonder, since the DSA and related groups such as *Labor Notes* in "Unite All Auto Workers for Democracy" (UAWD) largely ran Fain's election campaign and are playing a leading role in his administration.

The UAW and the Comaroff witch-hunt

One final note on the "reform" UAW leadership headed by Fain. On the basis of the racial and gender politics obsessively pushed by middle-class pseudo-left groups such as the DSA, the Harvard Graduate Students Union, UAW Local 5118, is playing a leading and filthy role in an ongoing witch-hunt against Professor John Comaroff, a noted and respected anthropologist and specialist in African societies. On the basis of unsubstantiated and slanderous #MeToo-type allegations of sexual misconduct, the unprincipled and anti-democratic fake "left" leadership of the UAW local is backing demands that Comaroff be fired.

While there was no mention of the GEO strike at last month's UAW Special Bargaining Convention, the lies about Comaroff reached the floor of the event when Rachel Petherbridge, a member of Local 5118's executive board, denounced Harvard for failing to fire Comaroff.

There is no contradiction between promoting reactionary and corrupt figures such as Shawn Fain and Bob King as examples of militant working class leadership and engaging in anti-democratic slander campaigns in order to promote anti-Marxist politics based on race, gender and other forms of personal identity. Nor is there any contradiction between the promotion of identity politics and support for American imperialism and its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, as well as its preparations for war against China.

The DSA speaks for privileged layers of the middle class—the main base of the Democratic Party outside of the intelligence and military establishment—which seek to use such politics as a lever for advancing their own careers, whether in academia, the Democratic Party or the trade union bureaucracy, and for increasing their share of the wealth of the top five percent at the expense of the broad mass of working people. There is nothing democratic, let alone socialist, in their politics or their opportunist maneuvers.

As was shown in the role of the DSA and its congressional members in assuring passage of Biden's bill to ban a strike of rail workers and impose a contract that had been voted down by the workers, their main function is to help the union bureaucracies divide and suppress the growing mass movement of the working class against capitalism.



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