

# DSA continues false promotion of new UAW administration as “reformist” as its members are elevated into top union positions

Marcus Day  
2 May 2023

In the aftermath of the United Auto Workers national union elections, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) are deepening their efforts to promote new UAW President Shawn Fain as a “reformist” and falsely present his administration as carrying out a “democratic” overhaul of the pro-corporate UAW apparatus. This manufacture of counterfeit “left” credentials for the new UAW administration is taking place at the same time as DSA members are being elevated into the upper echelons of the UAW bureaucracy.

On April 25, the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) published “Reformers Demand Democracy in UAW” in the online edition of its main publication, *The Activist*. The article was written by Alexandra Chan, managing editor of *The Activist*, a member of the communications team for the DSA in New York City, and a former intern for ACT-UAW 7902, the United Auto Workers local covering adjunct faculty at New York University.

The article is a mixture of unstated assumptions, lies, half-truths and whitewashing of what actually took place in the UAW elections.

Chan claims that the 2022 UAW elections resulted in “stunning victories” for “reformists,” namely, the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) caucus and its Members United slate, which included Fain and six other candidates, all of whom held positions in the bureaucracy prior to running for the UAW’s executive board.

In an effort to present Fain’s victory as a popular insurgency, the article cites fawning comments by a number of “UAW members” who, not coincidentally, are all DSA members and individuals who currently or previously held official positions in the UAW apparatus.

Chan quotes Sayeh Jafari, a former head steward at UAW Local 5810 at University of California San Francisco, who states the election outcome meant “kicking out the bad guys who have been taking our dues and buying Cuban cigars and going gambling and all the stuff that you think villain union bosses do in movies, and then also having an opportunity to build power in our workplaces with our co-workers, alongside building around a campaign to take back our union.”

The article acknowledges that Fain barely edged out his rival, the incumbent UAW president Ray Curry, in a “nail-biter” race, prevailing by less than 500 ballots. Later, “low election turnout” is referred to in passing and attributed to “the existing hostile culture toward democratic participation” in the UAW. This perfunctory and abstract explanation for low turnout is as far as the author can go, since any actual review of the causes of the abysmal voter turnout leads to the conclusion that Fain’s administration lacks the slightest legitimacy.

The UAW elections did not just suffer from “low” turnout. At 9 percent in the first round—only 104,000 ballots counted out of an eligible voting membership of more than 1 million—they had the *lowest* turnout of any national union elections in US history. The turnout in the second round, at 138,628 ballots cast or less than 13 percent, was only marginally higher. Fain ultimately won the presidential race after receiving just 69,459 votes out of more than 1 million possible voters, with a sizable portion of his support coming from the UAW bureaucracy itself.

The cause of the extremely low turnout was not the UAW’s “hostile culture toward democratic participation” in general, but rather the deliberate efforts of the UAW’s entrenched leadership to keep workers in the dark about the elections, suppress the vote, and confine the race as much as possible to the preferred candidates of the bureaucracy, Curry and Fain.

The way in which the UAW apparatus suppressed the vote was detailed comprehensively in a series of official challenges to the election process by Will Lehman, a socialist and Mack Trucks worker who ran for UAW president. Prior to the conclusion of the first round of UAW elections, Lehman filed a lawsuit in federal court demanding that voting deadlines be extended so that all workers could be given adequate notice and provided with a ballot. Lehman subsequently filed a formal protest against the election results with the UAW monitor.

The turnouts at universities and colleges with UAW members were particularly illustrative examples of the suppression of the vote. At the University of California, turnout was just 2.6 percent, despite a massive strike by 48,000 UC UAW members during the election. Similarly, at California State University, only 29 ballots were cast out of 11,000 members, and at the University of Washington, only 72 out of 9,000 members. At Columbia University, the turnout was only 208 ballots out of more than 3,000 members.

There is no innocent explanation for the fact that those interviewed by Chan come from these universities, have held official positions in their UAW locals, and say nothing about the extremely low turnout in the UAW elections there. The closest they come are the comments by Barry Eidlin, a professor at McGill University and former head steward at UAW Local 2865 at the University of California, who states, “Members in the UAW have not been accustomed to having a voice,” a variation on UAWD’s slanderous narrative that worker “apathy” was to blame for the low turnout.

But the attempt to explain away low turnout as the result of “apathy” obviously falls apart in relation to the UAW’s membership among grad students, who are largely newer members who have been involved in militant struggles over the past two years, and yet had the lowest percentage of ballots cast.

In line with the DSA’s blackout on Lehman’s campaign throughout the

Mass disenfranchisement in the UAW elections

UAW elections, the YDSA article makes no mention of it, even though he was the only socialist candidate in the race for UAW president.

The DSA, having backed Fain and Members United/UAWD, has maintained a guilty silence on the blatant trampling of workers' democratic right to vote in a union election, exposing all its pronouncements about "the fight for democracy" in the UAW as lying rhetoric.

### **The empty "reformism" of Fain and the UAWD**

Nowhere in the YDSA article is it explained with any concreteness what Fain and the UAWD's "reformism" consists of, or what program they are implementing now that they are in power, aside from vague references to "building democratic power."

This is no accidental oversight. The author is counting on the fact that her readers among the YDSA and DSA membership will be largely ignorant of Fain's record and the composition and programmatic character of UAWD.

Fain is a longtime fixture in the UAW bureaucracy. In 2009, he justified massive job cuts and concessions while serving on the UAW's national negotiating team for Chrysler, saying, "It was hard to swallow the cuts, but we have to preserve jobs and the future." Working with the Obama administration and the corporations, the UAW allowed tens of thousands of jobs to be destroyed, while permanently lowering the pay and benefits of new hires via the tier system.

In 2012, Fain was appointed as a UAW International Representative, pulling in a six-figure pay package, and in 2017 was appointed co-director of the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center, which was the nexus for corporate bribes to UAW officials.

UAWD, which backed Fain, is not a bottom-up "reform" movement, as the DSA and the corporate media have presented it. Rather, UAWD is the creation of sections of the UAW bureaucracy, largely comprised of mid- and low-level union officials grouped around the publication *Labor Notes* who share the same nationalist, pro-capitalist outlook as their erstwhile rivals in the Administration Caucus.

While Chan and the DSA-UAW representatives she cites portray Fain and the UAWD as irreconcilably opposed to the UAW's old guard, they ignore the desperate pleas for "unity" which Fain and other leading UAWD members directed at Administration Caucus officials at March's UAW Special Bargaining Convention.

In reality, Fain, the UAWD, and the DSA see genuine reforms as something to be relegated to the indefinite future. In a leaked memo in March, Fain's transition team wrote they would have to overcome "unreasonable expectations" among workers in this year's Big Three contract talks, i.e., suppress the demands of autoworkers to reverse decades of concessions.

Similarly, in her article Chan cites Cyn Huang, a former YDSA national co-director and UAW Local 2865 steward, who states that the UAW faces a "long-term revitalization project," a further attempt to lower expectations.

### **The UAW bureaucracy, the DSA and the Democratic Party**

The specific function of UAWD and Fain is to attempt to provide a more militant, "left" veneer to the reactionary UAW apparatus, which has become widely hated and discredited in the eyes of workers after decades

of painful concessions and the UAW corruption scandal which erupted in 2017.

The DSA is an integral part of the effort to shore up and maintain the credibility of the UAW as an institution. The DSA is not only serving as the PR representative of Fain's administration; it is increasingly providing the actual personnel and direction of the UAW bureaucracy.

The growing integration between the DSA and the UAW apparatus is being admitted more and more openly. In Chan's article, she recounts how one interviewee, Sayeh Jafari, was hand-picked as head steward on the basis of her YDSA membership. "During union onboarding, when [Jafari] shared that she organized with YDSA, she was asked to put her name forward for head steward because there was a lack of committed leadership," Chan states.

There are more recent and significant examples. Fain tapped Chris Brooks, a DSA member and former *Labor Notes* staff writer, to head his transition team. Brooks drafted the leaked strategy document warning of workers' "unrealistic expectations."

Jonah Furman, another leading *Labor Notes* staff writer and DSA member who has regularly been promoted by the corporate media, was announced in April as the UAW's new communications director. If Furman's compensation for the position matches his predecessor, Sandra Engle, he will receive over \$176,000 a year in the role. In an early demonstration of his commitment to "democracy," Furman denied press credentials to WSWS reporters at the UAW Special Bargaining Convention, maintaining the ban on the WSWS first implemented under the Administration Caucus.

There has been a growing layer of Democratic Party operatives and strategists being fielded by UAWD/*Labor Notes* for top union positions. Furman served as National Labor Organizer for Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign, and as Political and Labor Organizer for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's 2022 congressional reelection campaign.

Vail Kohnert-Yount, a UAWD member and former Department of Labor appointee by the Obama Administration, was appointed as assistant director of UAW Region 9A, a position with \$174,000 a year in compensation. Kohnert-Yount, whose parents are wealthy Democratic Party donors, was appointed by Brandon Mancilla, a fellow UAWD member and DSA member who was elected Region 9 director last year, and who was also interviewed in Chan's article in *The Activist*. A scandal emerged in February when it was revealed that Kohnert-Yount's appointment by Mancilla came after she donated \$25,000 to Fain's election campaign.

The integration of the DSA and groups such as *Labor Notes* higher into the union bureaucracy has by no means been confined to the UAW. Teamsters President Sean O'Brien was backed by both Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), closely affiliated with *Labor Notes*, as well as the DSA.

The DSA has been "a labor cheerleader and source of union staffers," wrote David Duhalde, a former DSA deputy director and staffer for the Democratic National Committee, in the DSA's *Socialist Forum* in March. The organization is now moving to "challenge union leadership," Duhalde says. What this really means is that the DSA increasingly sees its task as overseeing and directing the discredited union bureaucracies, which have become widely hated by rank-and-file workers after decades of sellouts and pro-corporate agreements.

The elevation of the DSA and sections of the pseudo-left into top union positions is of strategic importance to the Democratic Party, which is increasingly relying on the union bureaucracies in an effort to contain the growth of the class struggle.

The DSA itself is a section of the Democratic Party, representing sections of the affluent upper-middle class, including a growing number of union officials with six figure salaries. Where they are in office, the DSA's representatives have acted no less ruthlessly towards workers'

struggles than “establishment” Democrats. During the rail workers’ fight last year, Ocasio-Cortez and other DSA congressional members voted to legalize strike action and impose a contract workers were voting against.

The Democratic Party and sections of the state are seeking to give the union bureaucracies a “left” cover while also coordinating more closely with figures such as Fain and O’Brien to carry out the twin imperatives of American capitalism: the prosecution of imperialist war abroad and the class war at home.

Since taking office, Fain has met with a number of high-ranking Democratic Party politicians. Within days of being sworn in, Fain embraced Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer at the UAW’s Special Bargaining Convention. The governor, who has overseen billions in tax handouts to the auto companies, was lauded by Fain as “our friend, our ally, and our sister.”

On April 26, Fain met with Michigan Democratic Representative Elissa Slotkin—a CIA Democrat who did three tours during the war in Iraq as a member of the Central Intelligence Agency—to discuss “negotiations with the Big Three” and “bringing more manufacturing back home,” i.e., a program of economic nationalism.

And on April 27, Fain and UAW Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Mock met with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, with Sanders promoting the new UAW administration as “part of the rebirth of the labor movement.”

The Biden administration and the Democratic Party are well aware of the explosive anger among autoworkers, who are looking to fight against wages falling behind inflation and dangerous sweatshop conditions. They know that the auto companies are preparing to impose massive new job cuts and concessions in the contracts this year, as the corporations restructure their operations to fund the transition to electric vehicles while maintaining multibillion-dollar annual profits, while also carrying out a ferocious competition for market dominance against Chinese-based firms.

The assigned task of Fain and his UAW-DISA lieutenants—as well as O’Brien/TDU in the contract struggle for 340,000 UPS workers this year—is to use militant-sounding rhetoric while chloroforming workers as to the attacks being prepared by the ruling class.

The maintenance of a highly regulated and disciplined workforce in the auto industry, at UPS and elsewhere is not just an imperative for the immediate profit interests of the companies involved. US imperialism is rapidly escalating the war in Ukraine against Russia, while preparing to instigate a war against nuclear-armed China. Under these conditions, all demands by workers for any significant letup in their exploitation and oppression must be suppressed. Thus, relatively less discredited figures are needed to helm the union bureaucracies.

But the working class is on a collision course with these forces, and the process of building an alternative leadership is already underway.

On March 26, delegates from rank-and-file committees at GM, Stellantis and auto parts companies, as well as Caterpillar, met in Detroit to discuss the common conditions they face and work out a strategy to secure their interests. The workers resolved to build a network of rank-and-file committees throughout the auto industry, under the direction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

In a far-sighted prognosis, the resolution stated:

The real struggle for democracy in the union lies ahead. The reshuffling of positions among bureaucrats in Solidarity House changes nothing. The UAW’s collaboration with the government and corporations, the betrayal of workers’ interests, and the suppression of their democratic rights will not be changed by the replacement of Curry by Fain. What is required is the transfer of power to the rank and file and the elimination of the entire UAW apparatus.

It is this perspective, not the impossible self-“reform” of the UAW bureaucracy promoted by the DSA, which must guide the coming struggles of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**