

The DSA-backed “Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee” attempts to co-opt a rank-and-file movement from below

Tom Hall
9 May 2023

Last Wednesday, the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC), a group founded by the Democratic Socialists of America, held an online panel discussion with speakers drawn from several national unions. Titled “Building A Fighting Labor Movement,” the EWOC panel purported to bring together “grassroots caucuses working to rebuild rank-and-file union power” in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the United Auto Workers and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

In reality, the event is part of a concerted effort by a section of the union apparatus to co-opt and suppress a developing rank-and-file rebellion from below.

The panelists were mostly drawn from the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), both of which are serving increasingly as central props for the apparatus. In the Teamsters and UAW, they have been installed as part of the new leadership factions.

The speakers were not rank-and-file workers but union bureaucrats. They included:

- Scott Houldieson, former vice president of UAW Local 551 and chair of Unite All Workers for Democracy;
- Shunte Sanders-Beasley, vice president of UAW Local 869 at Stellantis’ Warren Stamping Plant near Detroit, who introduced herself as having known UAW President Shawn Fain since he was a shop chair at Kokomo Casting Plant in the 1990s;
- Antonio Rosario, a TDU Steering Committee member and paid organizer for Teamsters Local 804 in New York; and
- Carey Dall, former organizing director for the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED), which is part of the Teamsters, and now with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

The inclusion of Dall on the panel was particularly significant. He was a top official in the BMWED while the bureaucracy was collaborating with the Biden administration last year to block a strike by railroad workers.

Dall’s position paid him \$132,534 in 2022, placing him a world apart from the railroaders whom he claimed to represent. Moreover, as his work would have involved communication and outreach with BMWED members, he would have been in touch with White House officials and played a key role in the stonewalling and the endless unexplained delays throughout the process. This is how the BMWED responded to members’ rejection of a Biden-backed contract, along with its furious denunciations of rank-and-file opposition. Since then, Dall has jumped ship from the BMWED to the ILWU, which has also been working with Biden to block a strike by 22,000 dockworkers on the West Coast.

Then there is the involvement of the DSA itself. While claiming to support “grassroots” initiatives, DSA members voted in Congress to ban

the rail strike and even played a key role in the maneuvering over sick days to buy Democrats political cover. The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party, which is pursuing war with Russia and China abroad and preparing savage attacks on workers at home.

The DSA is now being brought forward to help fill and advise the apparatus of two of the unions with the most significant contract struggles this year, the UAW and the Teamsters. The Democratic Party is well aware of the growing movement of workers to break free of the apparatus and, in particular, of the influence of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and it is utilizing the DSA as a mechanism for suppressing the class struggle while attempting to give the apparatus a “left” cover.

The outlook that all of the panelists sought to promote was most clearly articulated by Dall. The “labor movement” faces three basic problems, he claimed: it lacks “an intelligent left wing;” the membership is “incredibly isolated and alienated” from their leadership and lacks access to “educational resources” (here Dall, in particular, pointed to the supposed “backwardness” of railroad workers in heavily Republican states); and the unions “intentionally lack the capacity to do worker engagement.”

This is the classic argument used to justify the activity of “reform” groups focused on unprincipled maneuvering within the bureaucracy, including taking up lucrative posts themselves. According to this line of reasoning, workers, especially American workers, are too “disorganized,” too “backward” and “uneducated” for any solution to emerge from the rank and file. Their role at best is relegated to being a pressure group, supporting one or another “progressive” faction within the bureaucracy.

This is connected with a deep hostility to the fight for socialism in the working class, which they claim will only alienate “backward” workers. If it is to ever be raised at all, it must be put off to a later date after the bureaucracy, perhaps under pressure from the rank and file, reforms itself—in other words, never.

This entire narrative is blown apart by the actual growth of the class struggle, which is taking the form of a rebellion against the union apparatus. The character of these layers as a faction of the bureaucracy, meanwhile, places them in direct conflict with this movement.

Tens of thousands of railroaders, including many living in “red” states, were reading the *World Socialist Web Site*, organizing themselves independently of the union bureaucracy and grappling with fundamental questions such as the origin of profit and the state as an instrument of class rule. Dall would not only have been intimately familiar with this in his role as organizing director; he would have been charged with countering it.

In the UAW, thousands of autoworkers supported the campaign for president of Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker running on an explicitly socialist platform. The UAWD opposed his campaign, especially rejecting his call for the abolition of the bureaucracy and its replacement with rank-

and-file power, which won a wide hearing.

The UAWD also opposed Lehman's lawsuit over the UAW's deliberate suppression of voter turnout. As a matter of fact, Fain has taken office even though the first round of the election was never even certified due to Lehman's complaint. The UAWD blamed low turnout not on the fact that hundreds of thousands of workers never received ballots but on worker "apathy." This claim was repeated in the panel discussion by Sanders-Beasley.

Now, the UAWD essentially controls the International Executive Board of the union and is the key base of support for the new president, Fain. Fain, however, has already made clear in a leaked document that his top priority is to beat back "unreasonable expectations" in advance of contract talks in the fall, under conditions in which automakers are demanding massive job cuts as they transition to easier-to-produce electric vehicles.

Houldieson devoted much of his remarks to laying out excuses for the upcoming betrayal. As opposed to Teamsters, where President Sean O'Brien took office in March of 2022, the elections in the UAW took place too "late" to be able to properly deal with the built-up "inertia" in the UAW, he said. Adding to UAWD's woes, he claimed, was that workers "do not understand" that "they are the union," and that "it's up to them to make changes."

Here, Houldieson is caught in a contradiction. If organizational "inertia" and workers' supposed "passivity" are key limitations, as he claims, then UAWD should not have opposed Lehman's call to abolish the apparatus and put the rank and file in power. In reality, he and the other panelists greatly exaggerate the "passivity" of the rank and file, which is largely a product of their own imaginations, in order to excuse their own existence as a faction within the apparatus itself.

Antonio Rosario, a newly hired Teamsters organizer, focused his remarks on the situation at UPS, where the new TDU-backed President Sean O'Brien has pledged to call a strike of 340,000 members if a new contract is not in place by July 31. This rhetoric is in response to the enormous opposition from the workers to the current, concessions-laden deal, which was imposed by the previous administration of James Hoffa Jr. despite a majority voting against it. Since taking office, O'Brien has sought to distance himself from his predecessor, claiming that his administration would break with the union's history of corruption and sellouts.

In reality, as was the case in the railroads, O'Brien is in regular discussions with the White House and is determined to put together a deal to avert a strike. Significantly, Dall let slip in his remarks that O'Brien was centrally and personally involved in the railroad sellout, characterizing his involvement last year as "babysitting" the bureaucrats in the BMWED and the engineers union.

Meanwhile, the Teamsters are working to sell out and isolate struggles at workplaces. They have banned its members for participating in pickets in the writers strike. They have also rammed through a contract for Coca-Cola distributors in Philadelphia, where the use of a "voting bus" raised serious questions about the legitimacy of the vote.

Rosario also stressed the importance of the UPS contract for the Teamsters' prospects for expanding its presence into Amazon. "We have to set the standard so high that it's going to raise the bar for everyone," he claimed.

"We can only win by building an army of organizers," he concluded. "Taking people like myself, who were working on the trucks, and training them up." Here, Rosario said more than he perhaps intended. The orientation of TDU, UAWD and similar groups is not towards organizing rank-and-file opposition but recruiting fresh layers of union bureaucrats. Rosario has only been on the Teamster payroll for a year, but he has already made \$73,441 in workers' dues money.

"We need to start working together with the other unions, with communities and organizations," Rosario continued. "We have to get the

public support, the community organizations together. They have billions of dollars, and we're fighting them with whatever millions our unions have. It's not enough. We need labor-friendly politicians or run ourselves." This "unity," which all of the other speakers endorsed, is not of rank-and-file workers in different industries but between the bureaucracies of different unions and corporate-endowed nonprofits and Democratic Party politicians.

A revealing exchange took place during the audience question-and-answer session at the end of the meeting. One attendee asked what plans the Teamsters and the UAW had to implement "open bargaining" in their contract talks this year. "Opening bargaining" is a tactic promoted by union consultant Jane MacAlevey. It allows workers, under tightly controlled union discipline, to attend bargaining sessions in order to create the appearance of transparency while giving workers no actual control over the process. Houldieson bragged that "open bargaining" had been used successfully by the UAW in various graduate student strikes. In reality, the UAW has sold out one grad student strike after another, triggering significant anger and opposition.

However, even this tactic is too much for the highly sensitive and delicate talks at UPS and the US automakers, where any loss of control could lead to significant sections of the US economy being shut down by a strike. "There's a lot of inertia built into the system already," Houldieson claimed. "It's not going to happen in these contract negotiations." Rosario answered, "I'm not privy to those conversations [at the top]. But I do know that there was an NDA [non-disclosure agreement] signed."

A real struggle cannot come from any faction within the apparatus, no matter how "democratic" they claim to be but only from the mobilization of the rank-and-file workers against the entire apparatus itself, which siphons off workers' dues money while working hand in glove with management and the government. That requires genuinely independent organizations, rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves and excluding union officials, and which lay the basis for a common strategy uniting workers across various industries.

That, however, is exactly what the groups in last week's panel are trying desperately to prevent.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact