

Shawn Fain's first weeks in office: Rebranding the UAW bureaucracy and promoting illusions in the Democratic Party

Eric London
11 May 2023

In a series of recent videos, memos, op-eds and public statements, United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain is attempting to “rebrand” and legitimize the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy in the eyes of the rank and file. The aim of this self-serving public relations campaign is to lay the groundwork for the transition to electric vehicles (EV), which the companies and federal government say will require hundreds of thousands of job cuts.

The transition to EV places autoworkers on a collision course with the transnational auto corporations. The auto companies are demanding the restructuring of the entire auto industry in the interests of their executives and Wall Street shareholders. The Biden administration, with the support of the Democrats and Republicans, has enacted a slate of new regulations to carry out this transition by slashing wages and shuttering plants across the continent. As the *New York Times* acknowledged on May 3, the switch to EV “comes with costs for autoworkers, because it takes fewer than half the laborers to assemble an all-electric vehicle as it does to build a gasoline-powered car.”

In the past, the companies could count on the UAW bureaucracy to force through their demands, including through fraud and coercion. But today, the UAW bureaucracy is seen as illegitimate in the eyes of most workers, hampering its ability to deceive workers and suppress the class struggle.

Last year, the courts and federal government oversaw the first-ever national direct elections in UAW history in an effort to endow the leadership with legitimacy in the run-up to the expiration of the Big Three contract for US and Canadian autoworkers this September. This plan fell flat, however, because the election is widely seen as a fraud. Fain is known as “President 3 Percent” because he won the fraudulent election with the support of just 3 percent of the rank-and-file membership. The election was “monitored” by law firms that represent the auto companies, and the UAW bureaucracy suppressed the vote. First-round turnout was just 9 percent, the lowest turnout for a national union election in US history.

This is why the media, the Biden administration, the courts, the Democratic Party and its Democratic Socialists of America faction are working to promote Fain as having “reformed” the UAW. Fain’s “rebranding” campaign is a critical part of this initiative, and it will also fall flat.

The foundation upon which this rebranding narrative is built is the notion that Shawn Fain is an everyman who is reforming the UAW. In a May 4 Facebook Live video, Shawn Fain attempted to present himself as a rank-and-file worker, declaring, “I’m a factory worker just like you, I don’t forget where I come from.”

Fain and the bureaucratic clique he represents are not workers; they are bureaucrats. They live comfortable lives paid for by workers’ dues

money. Fain’s longtime position in the leadership of the UAW bureaucracy has netted him \$1.5 million in recent years, with an annual salary of over \$150,000 paid from workers’ dues. He worked at the UAW-Chrysler joint training center when it was rife with corruption and was involved in the 2009 and 2011 contract negotiations which resulted in lower wages, the introduction of tiers and plant shutdowns. There are hundreds of UAW officials with similar histories.

Fain has presented himself as a reformer, saying in his Facebook video that his administration will “fight like hell” to “turn this union around.” But Fain has taken no action to give power back to the rank and file, and his record in office makes clear he has no intention of doing so.

On the contrary, Fain has gone out of his way to defend the hated UAW apparatus and has even claimed that longtime bureaucrats responsible for years of concessions have suddenly had a change of heart: “The IEB [the UAW’s International Executive Board] is united,” he said. “We came together during the convention and after the convention.” According to Fain, the UAW bureaucracy has suddenly seen the light and cleansed itself of past corruption without requiring any real change in personnel.

None of this has anything to do with reality. It is pure propaganda. As Fain said during his Facebook live stream: “Shout out to our Comms [Communications] team, they have been doing a lot of work on rebranding.”

To carry out this rebranding, Fain has brought in a slate of Democratic Party staffers, including new Communications Director Jonah Furman, a former Democratic Party staffer for Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, as well as Vail Kohnert-Yount, a former White House intern from a family of wealthy Democratic megadonors who held a high-level position in the Labor Department. Furman and Kohnert-Yount, as well as Fain’s transition manager Chris Brooks and new UAW Organizing Director Brian Shepherd, are members of the Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party with no connection to socialism.

Central to this rebranding initiative are Fain’s efforts to promote the Democratic Party and to trick workers into thinking that capitalist politicians will “pressure” the corporations to meet workers’ demands. Essentially, Fain is telling workers to place all their faith in their enemies.

“I was in DC last week meeting with a lot of people in Congress and the White House,” Fain said on Facebook live. Referring to Biden and various Senate and House Democrats as “our allies in government,” Fain concluded: “We’ve got a lot of people on our side in Washington.”

The individuals Fain referred to are open enemies of the working class. They include politicians like Elissa Slotkin, Sherrod Brown, Dick Durbin, Bernie Sanders, Gary Peters, Jamaal Bowman and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, all of whom recently voted to legalize a railroad workers’ strike, or, in Sanders’ case, played a key role in the parliamentary maneuvers that

ensured the anti-strike bill's passage. These politicians also voted to spend tens of billions of dollars to arm the Ukrainian military in the US-NATO war against Russia, which is driving up living costs for workers around the world and threatens to spiral into a nuclear catastrophe. The same politicians have declared an end to any public health measures aimed at protecting workers from the ongoing spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already killed many autoworkers.

In a series of PR stunts, Fain allowed these politicians to act "shocked" over low wages and poor conditions in auto plants. Referring to Ultium Cells battery workers, Bernie Sanders said in a video with Fain that he "cannot believe they're hiring people at \$16.50 an hour," although it is common for new hires to be paid this low in UAW contracts. For example, many UAW members at the auto parts company Dana Inc. start off making as little as \$17 an hour.

After his trip to Washington, Fain wrote a *Detroit News* opinion article reiterating his call to work with the Democratic Party to pressure the companies for a "just transition" to EV. He wrote, "Our message to them was clear: The EV transition must be a just transition. We cannot allow the automakers to start a race to the bottom for working class Americans. We support a clean auto industry, but we won't build it on the backs of the workers who make this industry run."

The reality is that the UAW bureaucracy and Democratic Party have been "allowing the automakers to start a race to the bottom for working class Americans" for the last half century. Since the 1979 bailout of Chrysler, the UAW bureaucracy has helped the corporations shutter plants, slash wages, and create conditions of exploitation unprecedented since the UAW's founding in 1935.

The last time the companies and government called for restructuring the industry was in 2008-09, and they got what they wanted because the UAW collaborated with the Obama administration to bail out the auto companies and impose the costs of the economic crisis onto autoworkers. Wages for new hires were cut in half. A system of tiers was created to slash costs and divide workers against each other. The Obama administration directed this transformation as it handed over billions of dollars in bailout money to the auto companies. At this time, Fain sat on the UAW's negotiating committee and supported these cuts. He told an Indiana newspaper in 2009, "It was hard to swallow the cuts, but we have to preserve jobs and the future."

Fain and the UAW bureaucracy are also lending support for the Biden administration's plan to prepare the US economy for an extended war against Russia or China, which will require the suppression of the class struggle to keep production running for "national security" reasons.

The UAW bureaucracy has fully integrated itself into the state apparatus and is playing a critical role in helping US imperialism transition to electric vehicles to outpace its competitors and prepare for war. A 2019 White Paper published by the UAW asked, "how has China gotten out ahead on the battery arms race?" and in 2022, Biden said the transition to EV was necessary to reduce dependence on Russian oil so that "we're never again forced to pay the price of a menacing dictator halfway around the world." The UAW bureaucracy has put itself at the service of the American government for wars the working class has no interest in supporting.

In his town hall, Fain demagogically said it was "shameful" that the US government is giving billions of dollars in loans to Ultium Cells to build low-wage plants in places like Lordstown, Ohio and Warren, Michigan. But Fain had nothing but praise for the same politicians responsible for doling out the money.

In a May 2 letter to the UAW staff leaked to the press, Fain said, "We expect action from the people in power to make it right" at Ultium, which is a joint venture between GM and LG Energy. "I want to make sure our staff are armed and ready with the same tone and message." This, Fain has stressed, is the keystone in his fight for a "just transition."

But there will be no "action" on behalf of workers from the likes of people like Sherrod Brown, who was himself involved in issuing Ultium Cells a \$2.5 billion government loan. In a December 12, 2022 statement titled "Brown announces \$2.5 billion loan to Ultium cells," Brown called the loan a "pro-American, pro-worker industrial policy."

Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, whom Fain recently called "our friend, our ally and our sister," issued a statement praising a similar multibillion-dollar corporate giveaway in Michigan, stating, "We've been working hard to outcompete other states for every job and every dollar of investment, so everyone knows Michigan is the place to do business." In other words, Fain is supporting politicians responsible for the same "race to the bottom" he says he opposes.

Fain and his "comms people" are aware that many rank-and-file autoworkers will view these appeals to corporate politicians with disgust. To provide a fig leaf for this orientation, Fain has claimed he is "not yet" willing to endorse Joe Biden's 2024 presidential campaign. This is a move aimed at giving Biden the opportunity to falsely dress himself up as an ally of autoworkers, even though he was actively involved in the restructuring of the auto industry in 2008-09.

In an April 7 article, NPR acknowledged the UAW leadership's challenge in "rebranding" itself and rehabilitating the Democratic Party: "Newly elected UAW officials who are close Fain allies say it's important that the union have more one-on-one conversations about politics with members, on the shop floor, in the union hall and elsewhere," NPR wrote. The article quoted Fain as saying, "Yes, we're going to be a lot more active and a lot more direct with our elected leaders about what we expect."

But NPR cited Georgetown University labor-management Professor John Russo, who "says to get the membership fired up about a particular candidate requires trust in their leadership. The past corruption scandals, still a fresh memory for many, make that harder, even with a new leadership team in place." The UAW must manage "expectations" relating to wages and working conditions: "A better-than-expected contract makes finding unity on political issues easier. But not meeting members' expectations has the opposite effect. Such is the road ahead for the new UAW leadership."

Fain's rebranding effort will not succeed, because it offers nothing for the rank and file. Despite the change in rhetoric, the "new" administration is proving to be just as pro-management as its predecessors. At Clarios' battery plant in Toledo, Ohio, the "new" UAW leadership gave a preview of how it will treat the rank and file by bringing back a contract with insulting 3 percent annual wage increases and cuts to overtime. Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that local UAW officials said the contract was being pushed by national UAW leadership. Workers rightly voted against the sellout by 99 percent and are now on strike.

An internal UAW memo from Fain's staff leaked to the media in March made clear the bureaucracy is preparing a massive sellout when the Big Three contracts expire this year. Warning that "Unrealistic expectations can result in despair/anger," the memo stated:

Expectations have to match reality and where we are. We can't set unreasonably high bargaining or organizing expectations based on enthusiasm for the slate and for reform. We need to say: We are here for the long game. ... This won't be accomplished in 6 months. It will take years. We need to set clear, definable, and achievable goals for the contract campaign.

Fain does not publicly tell workers what he tells his staff and the politicians in private. In private, he agrees that expectations must be tempered so a sellout can be rammed through; but in public Fain tries to

present an alternate reality, where the bureaucracy is ready to fight and the rank and file is passive. During his Facebook Live stream on May 4, he said that the companies are “looking at the membership to see where you are. We can talk tough all day, we can talk tough at the bargaining table, but unless the company sees that the members are with us, it’s all going to be talk.”

Blaming the rank and file is the longstanding method of the anti-worker bureaucracy and the sections of it which posture as “reformist,” such as *Labor Notes* and Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD).

The reality is the rank and file is not to blame for past sellouts, and the rank and file is ready to fight for massive wage increases, COLA and for an end to all layoffs and plant closures. What is required is for the rank-and-file membership to organize itself across plants, across the auto industry, and across national boundaries in rank-and-file committees to unify with workers in Canada, Mexico and elsewhere to ensure any switch to EV is done in the interests of the working class, not according to the diktats of the corporations.

In the first round of the UAW election held in the autumn of 2022, rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman won 4,777 votes, nearly 5 percent of the total, on a campaign aimed at abolishing the UAW bureaucracy and returning power to the shop floor. Lehman called for the building of a network of rank-and-file committees linked to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), a global organization aimed at harnessing the power of the international working class in a unified struggle against the transnational corporations.

In November, when it was clear the UAW bureaucracy did almost nothing to inform workers that there was an election taking place, Lehman sued the UAW and the court-appointed monitor and demanded the court require the UAW to provide actual notice of the election to the entire membership. Federal Judge David Lawson (appointed by Democratic President Bill Clinton) ruled in favor of the union, and as a result the election took place behind the backs of the rank and file. Now Lehman has filed a complaint with the Department of Labor demanding it overturn the election and re-run it with full notice to the rank and file.

The rank-and-file strategy embodied in Lehman’s campaign is now being carried into the Big Three contract fight. Walkouts and protests are growing well in advance of the expiration, as evidenced by the strike in Clarios and by the growth of the class struggle on a global scale. As workers in countries like France, Germany, Britain and Sri Lanka launch powerful struggles against inequality and attacks by the corporations and capitalist governments, rank-and-file autoworkers have immense potential power.

Workers need not “wait and see” how Fain’s administration will act. It has already exposed itself through its phony “rebranding” initiative. The key to the situation is that rank-and-file workers can unleash their strength and transform the industry to meet *their* interests by building rank-and-file committees that *they* control, outside the domination of the bureaucracy.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact