

Sanders promotes UAW bureaucracy, economic nationalism in online event

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With militancy growing among 150,000 Ford, General Motors and Stellantis autoworkers as their September 14 contract deadlines approach, the Democratic Party is increasing its efforts to shore up the credibility of the pro-corporate United Auto Workers apparatus.

This dynamic was on display at an online event organized by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and featuring UAW President Shawn Fain last Thursday. The event, titled “Fighting back against corporate greed,” was aimed at both boosting Fain’s “left-wing” credentials and channeling workers’ anger behind support for the Democratic Party, one of the two main parties of Wall Street, inequality and war.

Throughout the hour-long meeting, Sanders and Fain made repeated reference to the disastrous conditions workers face: the divisive wage and benefit tier system, 60- to 80-hour workweeks, factory closures, eroding living standards and unsafe workplaces. Three autoworkers—two of whom have official positions in the local UAW apparatus—were interviewed by Sanders about the grueling situation in the plants. Both Sanders and Fain criticized “corporate greed” and the massive profits of the auto corporations.

Behind Sanders and Fain’s remarks is an awareness that anger among workers over social inequality, inflation, endless wars and other grievances is reaching an explosive level. However, these rhetorical appeals to social discontent were combined with a narrative which covered up for the Democratic Party and the UAW bureaucracy, which are both centrally responsible for creating the conditions workers now confront. Not once did either speaker refer to the Obama-Biden administration’s brutal restructuring of the auto industry in 2009, with the support of the UAW and Fain himself, which resulted in the halving of all new workers’ wages and the destruction of thousands of jobs.

Cover-up of voter suppression in the UAW elections

Sanders began by seeking to invest Fain’s administration with some degree of legitimacy. “Shawn has held a number of positions within the UAW and in March was elected president of that union, one of the great unions in America. And that was the first time the UAW had a direct election where the members actually were able to vote. Before they had a complicated, kind of top-down system. This is the first time it was opened up. And Shawn won that.”

But Sanders’ brief and rosy presentation of Fain’s ascendance to the presidency covered up the flagrantly anti-democratic manner in which the UAW’s national elections were conducted.

The elections were only held because of a sprawling corruption scandal—never mentioned by Sanders or Fain during the livestream—in which top UAW officials were revealed to be taking corporate bribes and embezzling workers’ dues.

Forced to hold direct elections which it had opposed, the UAW bureaucracy proceeded to suppress the vote as much as possible, as detailed in a series of official challenges by Will Lehman, a socialist and rank-and-file candidate from Mack Trucks. A substantial portion of the UAW’s membership was never informed of the elections or provided ballots, resulting in a turnout in the first round of just 9 percent, the lowest of any union election in US history.

Fain, a longtime fixture in the UAW bureaucracy, was ultimately sworn into office with just 69,459 votes, a tiny fraction of the UAW’s 1.1 million active and retired members.

The Big Three contracts

In a Freudian slip, Sanders continued, “Since he has been in office, Shawn has made it clear he is prepared to stand up for corporate greed [sic], and for the rank and file of the UAW and the retirees as well.”

Indeed, Fain has made it clear he is prepared to stand up in defense of corporate profits. His administration isolated and sold out the first major strike by autoworkers this year, forcing a sellout contract on 500 Clarios battery workers, an agreement workers had twice voted to reject previously. More recently, the UAW apparatus was rebuffed by workers at the Lear seating plant in Hammond, Indiana, who voted by 95 percent to reject a pro-company, union-backed deal that would have maintained poverty wages.

Frightened and seeking to head off a growing rank-and-file rebellion, the UAW in recent weeks has claimed that it is proposing a series of popular measures to the Big Three auto companies, including “substantial” wage increases, the elimination of tiers, COLA (cost-of-living raises), pensions, retiree health benefits, and other items which the UAW bureaucracy has previously given up over the past 45 years. The UAW bureaucracy largely lifted its proposals from a widely circulated statement of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, while significantly watering them down and leaving out how workers themselves can fight for their demands.

Fain’s administration has neither the intention nor the strategy to win what workers need. Its chief concern, beyond containing workers’ opposition, is to enrich its own institutional interests.

Sanders praised the massive corporate incentives contained in the “Inflation Reduction Act,” which he voted for, and falsely presented them as aimed at addressing the climate crisis, before adding, “But when US taxpayer dollars go to help a corporation, that corporation has got to respond by paying its workers decent wages and providing decent benefits. You can’t give them money and then have starvation wages.”

Sanders’ comments were in reference to the billions in state handouts to the auto corporations to build electric vehicle and EV battery plants. Fain

replied, “You bet. And that’s the whole issue with where we started out with this EV transition. If you look at the Ultium plant in Ohio, they’re starting at \$16.50 an hour, and it takes seven years—they’re working with chemicals that aren’t even regulated yet, people are vomiting, they’re passing out, there are safety concerns—they’re starting at \$16.50 an hour, and after seven years, they go to \$20 an hour.”

Sanders and the UAW’s criticisms of low wage and hazardous working conditions at the new EV plants, however, are nothing more than a smokescreen, given that the UAW oversees similarly abominable conditions at the plants where it has operated for decades. The UAW’s real objective, as is made clear in a whitepaper on Ultium, is to secure additional revenue streams through new “joint labor-management” structures, and to receive assurances from the Biden administration that it will incentivize or all but mandate the UAW’s presence at the EV plants.

Promotion of reactionary economic nationalism

Later in the meeting, Sanders posed the question to Fain, “Shawn, how did we get into this situation?”

Fain replied:

I think it’s several factors playing into it. But I mean, naturally, laws change, things happened. Corporations were allowed to raid pension funds, then they didn’t put the money back in. And then they talked about legacy costs being a problem and you know, trade laws that are very unbalanced came into play. And naturally, corporations, you know, want to exploit cheaper labor, and cheap countries that have no environmental restrictions and poisoning the environment further, and there’s a whole plethora of problems.

And on top of that, you know, just to be upfront, I mean, a lot of our leadership in organized labor, and the UAW particularly had been complacent. I mean, they rested on the laurels of the Walter Reuthers and the leaders of the past that fought the battles my grandparents generation, that changed and raised the standard for everybody. So, you know, it’s a combination of several things.

Fain’s explanation amounts to a deliberate whitewashing of the pro-corporate, anti-worker policies and criminality of successive UAW administrations. From the late 1970s, the UAW bureaucracy integrated itself ever more closely into management, receiving both illegal bribes and “legal” payoffs in the form of billions of dollars funneled through the joint labor-management programs. Throughout, hundreds of thousands of autoworkers’ jobs were destroyed, and workers suffered a sharp retrogression in their standard of living.

It was not “complacency” by a few misguided UAW leaders, but rather the UAW’s nationalist and pro-capitalist program, under conditions of the globalization and transformation of the world economy, which have resulted in the transformation of the UAW bureaucracy into a direct instrument of corporate management and the enforcer of countless betrayals.

Sanders responded to Fain’s comments with a nationalist rant of his own, stating:

I remember Shawn mentioned and many of the viewers will remember the big fights we had over NAFTA, permanent normal trade relations with China. Believe me, I mean, all the unions

understood it. And I understood it. Many members of Congress understood. It didn’t take a genius to understand that the function of these terrible trade agreements was to say to corporations, why do you have to pay a worker in America a living wage, when you go to China and pay people pennies an hour? Go to Mexico? I remember back then, literally 25 cents an hour. How are you going to compete against that? So for corporations that’s great, throw people out on the street, close down 60-65 factories, but they’re busy opening factories in other parts of the world.

Later, perhaps sensing that his nationalist diatribe had become too explicit, Sanders added as an afterthought, “You know, and we cannot allow that. We got to raise the wages of poor people around the world, not lower wages in America.”

Sanders, who has at times falsely labelled himself a socialist, has long promoted an economic nationalism which has paralleled the positions of the fascistic former president Donald Trump—positions which have been shared by the trade union bureaucracies, as Sanders acknowledged. Both Sanders and Trump have blamed “bad trade deals” and demagogically attacked corporations for shifting production to other countries—Trump with an overt xenophobia and anti-immigrant chauvinism, while Sanders with a more subtle, “progressive” veneer.

But in both cases, the aim is to divert attention from the source of the attacks on workers in every country: capitalism.

In the course of the meeting, Sanders sought to present Fain and the UAW apparatus as carrying out a titanic struggle for the interests of workers. Referring to the recent comments by CNBC host Jim Cramer that Fain is supposedly promoting “class warfare,” Sanders replied, “That is what we have experienced for 40 years, except one class keeps winning, and it’s time now for the working class to move forward.”

Sanders’ entire career and his erstwhile calls for “political revolution,” however, have been dedicated to promoting the fiction that the Democratic Party can be a vehicle to advance the interests of workers, rather than what it is: one of the world’s oldest capitalist parties, a representative of big business and the super-rich, and a ruthless enemy of the working class. In two campaigns for US president, Sanders worked to channel a growing leftward movement of workers and young people and direct it back behind the candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden.

More recently, Sanders played a key role in the banning of a railroad strike last year, allowing legislation to be fast-tracked through Congress. Congressional representatives from the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America—which backed Sanders’ presidential campaigns—such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez also voted to impose a pro-corporate contract against rail workers’ will.

The Biden administration is increasingly relying on both the trade union bureaucracies and pseudo-left groups such as the DSA to try to contain and suppress the class struggle, which is erupting to the surface in a series of strikes, including tens of thousands of writers and actors, and widespread opposition among UPS workers to the Teamsters’ sellout contract. The White House is particularly concerned to prevent the emergence of an uncontrollable movement of the working class from threatening its escalation of war against Russia—which Sanders has pledged to support “until victory”—and preparations for war against China.

The use of radical-sounding rhetoric by Fain and Sanders has an interrelated purpose: to give a “left” facelift to the UAW bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, which are both increasingly discredited, and head off a looming social explosion.

Workers will advance their interests only through the development of rank-and-file committees under their control, independent of the Democratic Party and its defenders.



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