

The origins of the UAW’s phony “stand up strike” policy

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UAW President Shawn Fain and his supporters have presented his “stand up strike” policy as a strategic masterstroke, designed to keep the auto bosses off guard and give UAW officials leverage to escalate strikes and ramp up pressure on companies to hand over “record contracts.”

So far, however, the “strike” has not been a strike at all. Although 97 percent of GM, Stellantis and Ford autoworkers voted to walk out in unison on September 14, Fain has kept almost 90 percent of UAW members on the job, forcing workers to produce vehicles and profits for the auto companies.

Last Friday, with Fain clad in a camouflaged shirt and workers expecting that he would expand the strike to hit some of the industry’s most profitable plants, the UAW president fired off another dud: calling out 5,600 workers at 38 parts distribution centers across the country. Because these workers are at the very end of the supply chain—packaging and delivering already manufactured parts to dealerships and retailers—the walkouts will have no effect on production.

“Limiting the workers on strike also limits the financial pain for automakers,” the financial publication *Barron’s* said of the UAW’s latest move. “Losing any part of the manufacturing system is problematic, but parts and distribution aren’t as significant as stoppages at highly profitable truck plants.”

This is provoking widespread frustration among rank-and-file workers. “Fain claims he wants to abolish tiers,” a Michigan Ford worker said, “but we’re divided into tiers in this strike. We can’t win if some of us are out, and the rest are still building F-150 trucks for the company.” Increasingly, workers are pressing for an all-out strike to break the resistance of the corporations to their demands.

The immense social power of the working class arises from its relationship to the means of production. By withholding their labor power from the capitalist owners, workers can deprive the corporations of the soul source of their profits, the extraction of surplus value from workers during the process of production. The “stand up strike” is based on undermining this power and replacing this elemental weapon of the class struggle with middle class publicity stunts aimed at shifting “public opinion,” i.e.,

largely consumers, businesses and politicians, against the targeted corporation.

Since first hearing about this, many workers have asked themselves who came up with this nonsense?

A series of text messages obtained by the *Automotive News* from UAW Communications Director and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member Jonah Furman provides some hints. In them, Furman says, the UAW is inflicting “recurring reputations damage and operational chaos” on the Detroit automakers. “They can basically price in an all-out” strike, Furman claimed, adding, “If we can keep them wounded for months, they don’t know what to do.”

First, it is complete nonsense to claim that pinprick strikes are more effective than an all-out strike, which analysts predict would cost the automakers \$1 billion in the first 10 days alone. Second, the UAW has given the corporations ample time to stockpile vehicles and shift resources if need be.

Most revealing, however, is Furman’s reference to creating “operational chaos” for the companies. In the early 1990s, the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) initiated a campaign of extremely limited strikes and protest stunts, which they called “CHAOS,” an acronym for “Create Havoc Around Our System.” AFA President Sara Nelson, a leading DSA member and close ally of Shawn Fain, continues to be a firm advocate of this policy and is currently employing it in negotiations with Alaska Airlines covering 6,500 flight attendants under the motto “Pay us or Chaos.”

In a statement issued September 22, the AFA hailed Fain for expanding the UAW’s “Stand Up Strike—CHAOS like—against General Motors and Stellantis at 38 locations across 20 states at noon today, bringing the total plants on strike to 41.”

The *Wall Street Journal* published an article the same day, entitled, “Why Chaos has come for Detroit.” In it, reporter Ben Cohen writes: “The UAW’s Stand Up Strike strategy was not directly inspired by any one event, but you don’t have to squint to see the influence of the AFA’s Chaos.” The article quotes Nelson saying, “They [the UAW] certainly knew about the Chaos tactics. We’ve been sharing this with other unions for a long time.”

The inventor of CHAOS, the *Journal* reports, was David Borer, who was hired as the AFA’s director of collective bargaining in 1987, the year after a billionaire asset stripper fired 4,000 striking TWA flight attendants, who were members of a rival union. As a result, the *Journal* reporter says, Borer referred to his copy of Sun

Tzu's 5th century BC treatise, "The Art of War," and devised the strategy, which, in fact, is a policy of complete surrender.

According to the union's web site:

CHAOS is AFA's trademarked strategy of intermittent strikes and other non-traditional work actions. It is an integral part of our public contract campaign and the strongest weapon in our arsenal. The form CHAOS takes will be unique. Where an intermittent strike against a few flights might work best at one airline, an all-out strike for a day or a week might be the best tactic somewhere else. CHAOS is so powerful because we can adapt it to the specific facts of our campaign, keeping airline executives off balance with the element of surprise.

The AFA first employed the tactic at Alaska Airlines in 1993, after failing to reach an agreement during three years of negotiations. Once the 30-day "cooling off" period imposed by the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton under the anti-strike Railway Labor Act expired, Alaska Airlines imposed drastic cuts in work rules, pay and pensions and trained hundreds of management personnel and scabs to replace flight attendants if they struck.

Although the AFA was legally free to call out 1,550 Alaska flight attendants—who had voted by 96 percent to strike—it engaged in a series of consumer boycotts and publicity stunts, including leafleting passengers on board Alaska flights and getting flight attendants arrested for civil disobedience during pickets and a sit-in outside of company headquarters.

According to the AFA, "just twenty-four Flight Attendants struck seven flights, with no advance notice, over a period of nine months." Describing these "strikes" in a court filing, the AFA attorneys wrote: "Flight attendants reported to work and then, within the hour before the scheduled departure time for the flight, announced to their supervisors and/or the gate agents that they were engaging in strike activity. The union simultaneously notified Alaska of the work stoppages. Then, usually within an hour, the flight attendants informed their supervisors that they were ready to return to work on that or any other flight not subject to an AFA work stoppage."

Management responded by barring the flight attendants from returning to work, replacing unionized flight attendants with strikebreakers on nearly every flight for two months and issuing a letter warning "effective immediately, any flight attendant who participates in an intermittent—or 'chaos'—walkout will be discharged from service with Alaska Airlines."

After assuring the courts that it would not carry out an all-out strike, a judge sided with the AFA and deemed its ineffectual protests legal under the anti-strike Railway Labor Act. Within weeks, the AFA signed a deal, which provided marginal pay increases in exchange for reducing the number of flight attendants on aircrafts, staffing and scheduling "flexibility" and increased productivity. The concessions granted by the AFA and other unions reduced Alaska's costs by 22 percent in just two years.

In 2006, the AFA launched another CHAOS campaign as it tried to ram through concessions that would slash the wages and benefits of 9,000 Northwest Airlines flight attendants by 40 percent. Flight attendants rejected two AFA-backed contracts before the AFA narrowly pushed through a third in May 2007, which provided Northwest with \$195 million in annual cuts over five years. During this period, a federal judge ruled that, under the Railway Labor Act, it was illegal for flight attendants to strike after rejecting a contract because the airline was in the bankruptcy courts—a thoroughly anti-democratic ruling that the AFA bureaucracy welcomed.

The outcome of the AFA's strategy is seen in the current conditions of Alaska Airlines flight attendants, who live on an average annual salary of \$24,000 to \$27,000 and have been working without a new contract since 2014.

The record of the AFA is no different from the rest of the airline unions, which betrayed one strike after another in the 1980s and early 1990s, including the PATCO air traffic controllers (1981), Continental (1983), Pan American (1984), United (1985), TWA (1986), Eastern (1989) and American (1993).

While hundreds of thousands of airline workers saw their jobs, living standards and working conditions destroyed, the union apparatus was integrated into the structure of corporate management and saw its income soar. David Borer, the author of the "trade-marked" CHAOS scheme, for example, has moved onto a job as general counsel of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), where he made \$293,367 last year.

As craven as the AFA's policy is, the UAW bureaucracy is not confronting anti-strike laws like the 1926 Railway Labor Act, which Biden and Congress used last year to ban a strike by 110,000 railroad workers. In this case, it is the UAW bureaucracy, working with the Biden administration, that is imposing an anti-strike ban on autoworkers. If Fain cannot control rank-and-file workers, the White House would not hesitate to use repressive measures although that could quickly escalate into a direct political clash between autoworkers and the government.

The outcome of the bogus strike policy will be no better for autoworkers than it has been for flight attendants. For Fain and his pseudo-left advisers, workers are nothing but extras in their tweets, Facebook postings and video clips while they work behind the scenes with Biden to impose the dictates of the corporations. But this is not a game for workers whose lives and futures are at stake.

That is why power must be transferred from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor through the expansion of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committees Network, which issued a call last week for workers to demand the convening of local mass membership meetings so they can discuss and vote for all-out strike action.



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