

Facing rank-and-file rebellion UAW president holds rally with Democrats in Chicago

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9 October 2023

On Saturday afternoon, United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain held a rally in Chicago with national and local union officials and the Democratic Party mayor of Chicago Brandon Johnson. Other speakers included Stacy Davis Gates, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Sara Nelson, the president of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) and a leading member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Although there are currently 4,500 UAW members on strike at the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant, and the Chicago metro area is home to half a million union members, the event, held at the UAW Local 551 hall, only attracted a few hundred workers and their family members.

There were two aims of the rally. The first was to boost the credentials of Fain whose “militant” veneer is rapidly wearing off as a result of his disastrous “stand up” strike policy, which keeps four out of five autoworkers on the job producing profits for the auto companies. Fain and the UAW bureaucracy he leads are facing widespread opposition from the rank and file, which is in no mood to accept the sellout deal he has already crafted with the auto companies and the Biden administration.

The day after the Chicago rally, Mack Trucks workers in Pennsylvania overwhelmingly defeated a sellout agreement backed by Fain, which would have only raised wages by 19 percent over five years, leaves out any cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) and maintains the hated two-tier wage and benefit system.

A month before, nearly 1,000 workers at the Lear seating plant in nearby Hammond, Indiana, voted down the third UAW-endorsed sellout deal. Nevertheless, the UAW bureaucracy kept them on the job—ignoring their near unanimous strike mandate—so a walkout at the Lear plant would not force the closure of Ford Chicago plant. After Fain called out the Ford workers on September 29, the Lear workers were laid off and the UAW denied them strike benefits.

In his weekly Facebook Live address last Friday, Fain did not announce any further strike targets. Instead, he said the

union had won a “transformative” agreement with GM to bring its new EV battery plant under the UAW’s master agreement. In reality, this only means that the UAW will be able to collect dues from the low-paid workers in the battery plants while collaborating with the companies in the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs in the EV transition.

The second aim of the event was to provide a “progressive” cover to the Democratic Party, which intervened last December to outlaw a strike by railroad workers, is planning immigrant detention camps in Chicago and other cities and building Trump’s border wall, and is fixated on escalating military aggression against Russia and China, along with backing Israel’s war against the Palestinians.

In that sense, Saturday’s rally was a mutual aid benefit for these two anti-working class agencies—the trade union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party—which are deeply discredited. It occurs 11 days after Biden joined Fain for a photo op on a Michigan picket line and described the UAW president as a “kindred spirit.”

With strikes and militancy among workers escalating after decades of concessions contracts and social attacks, the Biden administration is relying on the UAW bureaucracy to wear down the resistance of workers and impose the type of labor discipline and austerity needed to convert the US into a wartime economy.

Fain and the rest of the UAW apparatus are more than willing to be integrated into the machinery of the capitalist government in order to carry out this role. That is the significance of Fain’s remarks at the Chicago rally where he referred to the role of then UAW Vice President Walter Reuther [Fain incorrectly describes him as President] in the conversion of the auto industry for military production during World War II.

“UAW members were essential in building Jeeps, tanks, B24 Liberator bombers,” Fain said. “That was called the arsenal of democracy. That arsenal was the vision of UAW

President Reuther. He had the vision of converting excess capacity... to be able to build a movement where we can produce airplanes and tanks without building new factories.

“Just as today, we have no respect from the boss class, from the CEO class and the corporate class. And when Reuther presented that idea back in the day, he was laughed at and mocked by the Big 3 CEOs who said stay in your lane.

“But the reality was when Pearl Harbor happened, FDR [President Roosevelt] went to Reuther and they adopted that plan and we don’t get credit for that today. Reuther’s arsenal of democracy, employed by FDR, and built by our labor was the main, integral piece of our winning that war.”

These comments, made under conditions of the escalating US/NATO war against Russia and ever greater provocations against China, must be taken as a warning by workers. In exchange for government backing, the union bureaucracy plans to go much further than Reuther and the UAW did during World War II, when it banned strikes and allowed war profiteering companies to impose brutal conditions in the factories. Today, Fain & Co. are subordinating the working class to a world war, which would be fought with nuclear weapons and result in the end of civilization.

The Chicago area has long been a center of various pseudo-left organizations, including the Democratic Socialists of America. The DSA specializes in providing a “left” cover to the union bureaucracy while functioning as a pro-war and pro-capitalist faction of the Democratic Party. The DSA currently has five alderman on the Chicago City Council, four of whom ran as Democrats.

Sara Nelson praised the Chicago Teachers Union for the 2012 strike and building “so much power that we have the mayor Chicago from CTU, that’s setting the agenda for the people.” She praised Fain as the “members’ president” and his bankrupt “stand of strike policy,” which is modeled on the civil disobedience and publicity stunts the AFA has used to prevent real strikes by flight attendants in defiance of the bipartisan anti-strike laws.

In his comments, Mayor Brandon Johnson—a former legislative official for the CTU and Cook County Commissioner—made a series of empty demagogic statements, praising the union bureaucrats and thanking them for putting him in office.

“So you’re gonna listen to us at the negotiating table, on the streets, at the ballot box, and we have made it very clear, if you don’t hear us, we’ll get a contract. But we’ll also send someone to the 5th floor [mayor’s office] who supported the labor movement.”

In order to secure Republican support for the war in Ukraine, the Democrats are adopting the most vicious policies against immigrants. Johnson recently signed a \$29.4

million contract with a defense security firm Gardaworld to build migrant camps for South and Central American migrants who have been bussed into Chicago by Texas Governor Greg Abbot.

In her remarks, CTU President Stacy Davis Gates also made the point that the backing of the unions was crucial for securing the election of Democrats. Comparing the autoworkers strike to the 2012 Chicago teachers strike, a point also made by Fain, she said: “Let me make it clear, we are never just fighting for a contract, we’re fighting for transformation. You use this contract campaign like Karen Lewis used her contract campaign back in 2012 and you transform. Cause our brother said we have a mayor in this city named Brandon Johnson. But we didn’t just get a mayor, we got aldermen. We didn’t just get aldermen, we got state senators.”

Comparing Fain’s conduct in the current struggle with the CTU’s role in 2012 reveals more than Gates intended. In 2012, Chicago teachers revolted against the school privatization policies of Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel—Obama’s former Chief of Staff. Then-CTU President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey shut down the powerful strike and agreed to the deal that paved the way for a record wave of school closing and teacher layoffs. Since then the CTU bureaucracy has moved to stifle every struggle by educators against the keeping of schools open as COVID spread and Democratic Party austerity measures were implemented.

Fain’s collaboration with the Democratic Party is the surest sign that he is preparing to sell out the autoworkers’ struggles. If workers are to defeat this betrayal, it is necessary to expand the network of autoworkers rank-and-file committees to fight for an all-out strike and win their demands. In this fight, rank-and-file workers must oppose both capitalist parties—the Democrats and the Republicans—and their policies of austerity, war and dictatorship.



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