How the pseudo-left covers up the UAW's betrayal of autoworkers

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Following the United Auto Workers' announcement of the ratification of pro-company agreements at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis on November 20, middle-class pseudo-left organizations have rushed to shore up the credibility of the UAW apparatus and prevent an accounting of its betrayal.

The Big Three contracts have been presented almost universally as "historic" by the media, the White House and groups which falsely present themselves as "left," including most prominently the Democratic Socialists of America. But this rosy narrative quickly proved difficult to maintain, since the UAW's supposedly "record" agreements provoked widespread opposition among workers. At GM, 47 percent of production workers voted to reject the deal, even according to the UAW's questionable official tally, which included workers at Ultium and GM Subsystems who were not General Motors employees at the time of the vote.

Substantial numbers of autoworkers rightly saw the contracts as the latest in a long series of sellouts by the UAW. The contracts were far away from the real demands of rank-and-file workers, who called for 50 percent wage increases, COLA fully tied to inflation, the restoration of pensions and retiree health benefits, a reduction of working hours with no loss in pay, no plant closings or layoffs, and more.

The only organized expression of workers' opposition was found in the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network. Rank-and-file committees at GM Flint and Lansing Assembly, Stellantis Toledo Jeep and Warren Truck, Ford Dearborn Truck, and the Mack Trucks plant in Pennsylvania countered the propaganda of the companies and the UAW bureaucracy and sought to mobilize support for an all-out strike throughout the auto industry, appealing to workers internationally for a united struggle.

Many more workers would have voted against the deals if they believed that it would have compelled the UAW leadership to fight for anything more. But from the beginning, UAW President Shawn Fain and his administration worked to defuse opposition and secure contracts acceptable to the corporations and the Biden administration.

The UAW leadership foisted a treacherous "stand up strike" policy on workers designed to exert maximum leverage not on the corporations, but on the workers. The vast majority of workers—70 percent even at the strikes' high point—were kept on the job making profits for the companies. Meanwhile, management was given a free hand to lay off thousands of workers during the strikes, placing them under extreme financial pressure by the time of the ratification votes.

After the deals were announced, UAW officials repeatedly declared they were the "best workers would get" and had "squeezed every last penny we could get out of these companies" (Fain).

But the UAW's claims to have "squeezed every penny" have rapidly fallen apart. Last week, GM announced the largest stock buyback in its history, totaling $10 billion, in addition to a 30 percent increase in its dividend. Both GM and Ford released updated earnings estimates forecasting a profit of $10 billion or more in 2023, and both have stated they plan to offset the relative growth in labor costs by increasing productivity (i.e., speed-up) and shedding costs.

Jacobin invents a "stunning victory"

The most cynical and self-serving defense of the UAW's treachery has come from the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), its magazine *Jacobin*, and the closely affiliated publication *Labor Notes*. In a series of articles, *Jacobin* has lied about the character of the contracts, describing them as a "historic, transformative victory" (November 1) and a "stunning victory" (November 21) and claimed they contained "big wage and benefit gains" (December 1).

In the latest article on December 4, *Jacobin*'s Alex N. Press writes, "The now-ratified Big Three contracts include a host of wins, from cost-of-living allowances given up during the Great Recession to wage raises of 33 percent to the conversion of many temporary workers into full-time positions, with some of those employees' wages more than doubling. The Stellantis contract also includes the reopening of an idled assembly plant in Belvidere, Illinois, a priority for that plant's former workers who have been scattered across the country since Stellantis shuttered the shop earlier this year."

Jacobin's cursory summary of the contracts is thoroughly dishonest. It counts upon its readers being ignorant of the actual details of the agreements and the real conditions of life autoworkers face.

The contracts raise workers' base wages 25 percent, not 33, a figure far below the 46 percent or more that workers had demanded. The 25 percent raise will mean workers will still be making in real terms less than they did 20 or even 15 years ago, given that the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates autoworkers' wages have fallen 30 percent since 2003. Meanwhile, the cost-of-living (COLA) raises will cover only a fraction of official inflation. The UAW itself estimates a COLA raise of less than 1.3 percent for senior workers in 2024.

Revealingly, the *Jacobin* article refers only to "many" temporary workers being converted to full-time status—indirectly acknowledging but skirting over the lies by Fain that *all* temporary workers would be converted in status under the contracts and that the phenomenon of "perma-temps" would be ended. In reality, the UAW granted GM the ability to keep temporary part-time workers in their second-class status in perpetuity, and Stellantis agreed to convert only a set number of temps beginning 90 days after ratification.

Lastly, while Press touts the reopening of the Belvidere assembly plant, she fails to mention that it is not scheduled to begin production until 2027, and that the company used the threat of its permanent closure to extract massive handouts from the state of Illinois, likely totaling well into the

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billions, with the support of the Democratic Party. In addition, an EV battery plant at the site is not projected until 2028, and workers employed there will without a doubt be relegated to a lower-wage tier, should the factory even materialize.

The UAW-Stellantis contract entails the closure of 19 facilities, and the UAW-Ford agreement characterizes all Rouge Complex workers as "surplus" as of December 1, with indications that a shift is soon to be eliminated at the complex's EV truck plant.

On December 7, Stellantis announced it would lay off up to 1,200 workers at the Toledo Assembly Complex as early as February 5. This includes 1,100 temporary part-time workers who were told they would be rolled over to full-time positions. The 5,800 Jeep workers struck for six weeks before the UAW announced its deal, which 61 percent of the production workers at the Toledo plant voted to reject.

These moves are only the opening shots of a massive assault on jobs which is planned under the transition to EVs.

The DSA defends its own betrayal

The DSA, a faction of the Democratic Party, has a vested interest in defending the UAW's sellout because it was centrally involved in "negotiating" the contracts, selling them to workers and imposing them.

Along with *Labor Notes*, the DSA led the campaign by the "Unite All Workers for Democracy" caucus and Members United slate in the UAW's national elections last year that brought current UAW President Shawn Fain into office.

The UAW's elections themselves were a travesty of democracy. The bureaucracy deliberately failed to provide adequate notice of the elections and refused to update its database with members' addresses, resulting in a historically low voter turnout of just 9 percent in the first round, as detailed in a series of election challenges and lawsuits by rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman.

The "election" of Fain—a career bureaucrat who had spent decades working his way up the apparatus—was declared in March after he won just 3 percent of the vote of the rank and file, with nearly 1 million UAW members excluded from voting. UAWD and *Labor Notes*, and behind them the DSA, nonetheless hailed Fain's election and deliberately covered up the trampling of workers' rights which it resulted from, despite claiming for years to be pursuing a struggle to "democratize" the UAW.

The elevation of Fain and other newly discovered "reformist" bureaucrats to the union's leadership was not the product of the rank-and-file rebellion among autoworkers, but rather a political intervention by the ruling class, led by the Democratic Party, to preempt a complete revolt.

Contrary to the media portrayal of the White House's "surprise" at Fain's election, the administration has worked assiduously to legitimize the UAW leadership. Biden's Department of Labor gave its blessing to the fraudulent UAW elections and lined up with the UAW bureaucracy against Lehman's lawsuit demanding that the elections be re-run and all workers provided adequate notice. During the auto contract struggle, both the UAW and the White House admitted they were in daily communication, in a conspiracy against workers.

The sellout of the Big Three autoworkers by Fain's administration, as well as strikes by Clarios battery and Mack Trucks workers this year, vindicates the warnings and assessment of the "new" UAW leadership made by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network. A resolution passed by a rank-and-file committees meeting in Detroit on March 26, the same day Fain was sworn into office, stated:

> The real struggle for democracy in the union lies ahead. The reshuffling of positions among bureaucrats in Solidarity House changes nothing. The UAW's collaboration with the government and corporations, the betrayal of workers' interests, and the suppression of their democratic rights will not be changed by the replacement of Curry by Fain. What is required is the transfer of power to the rank and file and the elimination of the entire UAW apparatus.

The "DSA-ification" of the UAW apparatus

The DSA has been an integral component of the Democrats' attempted rehabilitation of the UAW apparatus. Its members served not merely as "external" cheerleaders in the vein of *Jacobin*, but have come to comprise a significant portion of the UAW bureaucracy's leading personnel.

This includes:

• UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, who oversaw the sellout of Harvard graduate student workers in 2021

• UAW Region 9A Assistant Director Vail Kohnert-Yount, a longtime Democratic Party operative who was appointed to her position after donating $25,000 to Fain's campaign

• UAW Communications Director Jonah Furman, a former *Labor Notes* staff writer, and previously a leading campaign staffer for both Senator Bernie Sanders and DSA Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

• UAW Organizing Director Brian O. Shepherd, a Navy veteran

• Chris Brooks, also a former *Labor Notes* staff writer, who served first as Fain's transition team manager and now is "top assistant" in Fain's office

• Benjamin Dictor, UAW counsel

The elevation of the DSA's members has provided them with access to the lucrative incomes and privileges granted to the UAW's bureaucratic apparatus. Over 450 UAW staffers at the "Solidarity House" headquarters in Detroit are paid more than $100,000 a year, according to federal filings, with those at the regional director level and other top positions making over $200,000.

The elevation of the pseudo-left has by no means been limited to the UAW. A similar process has taken place within the Teamsters, with the "Teamsters for a Democratic Union" and the newly discovered "reform" candidate Sean O'Brien working to enforce sellout contracts at the railroads and among UPS workers over the past year, working closely with the Biden administration to ensure "labor peace."

The DSA, as the WSWS has explained, is not a socialist organization. It is a part of the Democratic Party and represents the interests of affluent layers of the upper-middle class. Organically hostile to the working class, they base themselves on the reactionary politics of race, gender, and other forms of identity. At the same time, the DSA seeks to keep workers subordinated to the union apparatuses (which it increasingly leads), in order to prop up the Democratic Party and the capitalist system as a whole.

In recent years, the DSA has been more and more exposed as naked defenders of imperialism and complicit in the corporate attacks on workers. Since 2022, the DSA's congressional representatives voted to ban a strike by rail workers and impose a widely hated contract, and they have supported funding the US-backed war in Ukraine and military aid for Israel, which is carrying out a genocidal war on Gaza.

The Biden administration has increasingly relied on both the union bureaucracies and the DSA as it escalates its imperialist wars abroad and its war on the working class at home. While the latest *Jacobin* article praises the UAW Executive Board's cynical resolution calling for a

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ceasefire in Israel's war on Gaza, it ignores the far more revealing comments made by Fain in an interview with the *Detroit News* on December 1, in which he made clear the resolution had nothing to do with defending the rights of Palestinians. "We're not picking a side between Israel and Palestine," he said, "but we do not want to see innocent people continue to be killed due to acts of terrorists. Deal with the terrorists, and move on."

Left Voice and Socialist Alternative: The UAW's next line of defense

As the DSA's pretense to be anything other than a mouthpiece for the Democrats and the union bureaucracy has grown increasingly threadbare, other organizations claiming to be "left" have stepped forward as an additional line of defense of the UAW's betrayal.

Examples of this marginally more subtle effort to maintain the UAW's credibility appeared in articles by *Left Voice* and Socialist Alternative last month.

Both articles, however, begin with out-and-out adulation of the UAW's pro-company agreements. On November 22, Socialist Alternative wrote, "As contracts are ratified, significant gains have been won. … These gains are a testament to the willingness to fight of all auto workers at the Big Three, and shows what can be won when strike action is taken. Every step of the way the Big Three bosses said that what workers were demanding was not possible, only to cave under the pressure the growing strike placed on their profits."

Left Voice, writing on November 12 before the contracts had been voted on, stated that although workers did "not win everything they aimed to," the UAW's agreements were "nonetheless a victory for the auto workers. The gains in these proposed contracts are substantial, and represent a significant restoration of the concessions on wages and benefits made to the Big Three over the last 15 years."

In their dishonest portrayal of the agreements' terms, Socialist Alternative and *Left Voice* differ little from *Jacobin*, or the UAW's own press releases for that matter. If anything, more lies and distortions are included, such as *Left Voice*'s claim that the COLA will "protect wages against inflation going forward," and the omission by both of any reference to the UAW's bait-and-switch regarding temporary workers.

While Socialist Alternative makes an offhand reference to Mack Trucks workers "voting down their TA" and falsely states they struck "for the first time in 35 years" (the strike this year was the second since 2019), they make no mention of Fain and the UAW leadership unanimously endorsing the deal workers rejected; the role of the Mack Trucks Rank-and-File Committee in organizing its defeat; and the blackmail tactics of the UAW apparatus to force through the same agreement weeks later.

After making clear their fealty to the UAW apparatus, both proceed to offer mild criticisms that have the character of loyal advice to the bureaucracy on how to better burnish its image.

Thus, *Left Voice* writes, "turning around a vessel as massive as the UAW, with its almost 400,000 members is not an easy task and cannot be done from the top down. Despite Fain's big ambitions, his class struggle rhetoric, and his admiration for the combative former UAW president Walter Reuther, the union remains controlled and limited by a bureaucratic leadership that continues to hamper the self-organization of its members and remains tied to the imperialist Democratic Party."

Later, they state the UAW's relationship with the Democratic Party "represents an existential danger for the UAW and the union movement. The Democratic Party, after all, is the tool which the state uses to tie union leaderships closer to the state to prevent them from exercising their full power."

First, to suggest that Fain has "big ambitions," is seeking to "turn around" the UAW, and is in some way at odds with the "bureaucratic leadership" is an exercise in deception. Fain is a product of the bureaucracy, was directly complicit in the 2009 concessions contract at Chrysler, and has absolutely no association with the struggles of the working class. He is nothing but the latest in a long line of "left"-talking union bureaucrats brought forward in an effort to prevent the rebellion of workers from taking an independent road.

More fundamentally, *Left Voice* falsely presents as a potential "danger"—the Democratic Party tying the union bureaucracy to the state—what is already a far-advanced and irreversible process. They pretend as though the transformation of the unions into instruments of the corporations and the state had not taken place decades ago.

Even from the earliest days of the formation of the mass industrial unions in the United States in the 1930s, Trotsky pointed to the inexorable tendency of the unions, as soon as they were consolidated, "to fall into the steel embrace of the imperialist state." In "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay," an article left unfinished at the time of his assassination by a Stalinist agent in 1940, Trotsky wrote:

> There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power ... the tendency towards "growing together" is intrinsic not in this or that doctrine as such but derives from social conditions common to all unions.

The "growing together" of the unions proceeded throughout World War II, with the UAW leadership—particularly Reuther—appealing to US President Franklin D. Roosevelt to convert the auto factories to military production to support US imperialism's war effort while the union enforced no-strike pledges. Significantly, Fain, Biden and Ford's current chairman have all praised the so-called "arsenal of democracy" and UAW support for war production in recent months, under conditions in which the US is rapidly escalating its military output and plans for war against China.

As David North explained in an essay reviewing Trotsky's last year:

> The analysis Trotsky made of the degeneration of the unions—their integration into the state power and corporate management—was extraordinarily prescient. The tendency toward the "growing together" of the unions, the state and capitalist corporations continued throughout the post-World War II period. Moreover, the process of global economic integration and transnational production deprived the trade unions of a national framework within which they could apply pressure for limited social reforms. No room was left for even the most moderate resort to the methods of class struggle to achieve minimal gains. The unions, rather than extracting concessions from the corporations, were transformed into adjuncts of the state and corporations that serve to extract concessions from the workers.

Thus, since 1979-80, when UAW President Douglas Fraser oversaw savage wage concessions and attacks on jobs at Chrysler and joined the company's board, the UAW apparatus has collaborated with management in an uninterrupted assault on workers. And while its membership among autoworkers fell from a high of 1.5 million to less than 400,000 today, it developed new sources of revenue to maintain and grow the wealth of the

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bureaucracy, including the transfer of billions in corporate cash via the "joint" labor-management programs. Notably, these "joint" programs are set to balloon even further under the contracts worked out by Fain & Co. this year.

The integrations of the UAW with the corporations and the state reached a new milestone in 2008-09, when the UAW apparatus collaborated with the corporations and the Obama administration to enforce far-reaching job cuts, plant closures, and wage reductions in exchange for billions in corporate shares and control of a multi-billion-dollar retiree health care trust. The brutal contracts had the support at the time of both Fain—as a member of the UAW's national bargaining council at Chrysler—and Biden, as vice president.

Left Voice presents those historic attacks as though it were all simply a misunderstanding, writing that the UAW leadership suffered from the "misguided belief that what was good for the company was good for the workers."

This subjective explanation has nothing to do with Marxism. The UAW officially adopted the policy of corporatism not as a "misguided belief," but rather as a reflection of the objective changes which had taken place in the relationship between the corporations, the union bureaucracy and the workers, changes which were driven by profound shifts in world economy.

The UAW, basing itself on a nationalist program and support for capitalism, had no progressive response to the development of globalization and internationalization of production. The UAW bureaucracy severed itself from even a remote connection to the day-to-day interests of workers, instead relying upon the corporations and the state for its continued existence.

Left Voice presents the UAW's decades of treachery as though it were a subjective error in order to promote the bankrupt perspective that the bureaucratic apparatus can be made to serve the interests of workers and be separated from the Democratic Party.

To cloak its perspective of reforming the bureaucracy in subterfuge and throw sand in the eyes of workers, *Left Voice* makes various references to the "self-organization" of workers and even the creation of "strike committees" and "democratic assemblies." Similarly, Socialist Alternative writes of "rank-and-file network" and "elected workplace structures."

What *Left Voice* and Socialist Alternative have in mind, however, are not organs of working class struggle which are genuinely independent of the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. Rather, these "committees" and "structures" would consist of rank-and-file workers *and* union officials and function as impotent appendages of the union apparatus, which, they believe, must extend its grasp more deeply and solidly among workers. Thus, Socialist Alternative writes of the need to "develop a whole layer of rank-and-file activists and shop stewards."

Build genuine rank-and-file committees

These counterfeit workers' "committees" and "self-organization" are a deliberate effort to divert workers from joining and expanding *genuinely* independent rank-and-file organizations, above all those which have been spearheaded by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) internationally.

In May 2021, the ICFI founded the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). In explaining the necessity for its founding, the ICFI wrote:

> New pathways for mass struggle must be created. More than 80 years ago, at a point in history when the degeneration of the existing trade union organizations was far less advanced than today, Leon Trotsky—the greatest strategist of world socialist revolution—wrote that the task of the Fourth International was "to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions."

In 2022, Will Lehman ran for president of the UAW as an explicit supporter of this perspective and the IWA-RFC. His program called for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and the transfer of power and decision-making to workers on the shop floor, organized in rank-and-file committees.

The call for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and for rank-and-file power, inextricably tied to the development of a socialist leadership in the working class, is the polar opposite of the perspective advanced by *Left Voice* and Socialist Alternative. While presenting themselves as socialists or even "Trotskyists," both *Left Voice* and Socialist Alternative long ago separated themselves from anything resembling Marxism or revolutionary socialism. Both are descendants of Pabloism—in *Left Voice*'s case, the tendency led by Nahuel Moreno in Argentina; in Socialist Alternative's, that led by Ted Grant in Britain.

Pabloism, like its offshoots, represented a revisionist, petty-bourgeois tendency which sought to liquidate the Fourth International and which repudiated all the fundamental principles of Trotskyism. It rejected the objectively revolutionary role of the proletariat and the necessity of a conscious Marxist leadership, instead seeking to subordinate the working class to the Stalinist parties, bourgeois nationalists, the social-democratic or labor parties, and the union bureaucracies.

While today they claim to support "independence" from the Democrats (and thus posture as more "radical" than the DSA), both *Left Voice* and Socialist Alternative are in fact firmly oriented towards it—in the case of Socialist Alternative, operating within the DSA and collaborating closely with Democratic Party politicians. They are hostile to any insurgent movement by the working class against the union apparatus—which they view as an inviolable institution—precisely because the bureaucracy serves to chain workers to the Democrats and the capitalist system.

The development of a powerful, mass movement of the working class from below, capable of fighting for and securing its rights, will only be achieved through an insurrection against the pro-capitalist union bureaucracies and relentless struggle against all their defenders.

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