

# Labor Notes hails sellout contract at Allison Transmission, which produces parts for Israeli fighting vehicles

George Kirby, Tom Hall  
13 February 2024

Last month, the United Auto Workers bureaucracy rammed through a contract at Allison Transmission in Indianapolis, Indiana, a company which produces parts for both the auto industry and military vehicles. Predictably, the pseudo-left *Labor Notes* publication has since leaped to the defense of the UAW apparatus, into which it is integrated, with an article totally falsifying the record of the contract struggle.

*Labor Notes* writes, not as misguided outsiders, but as a guilty party to the sellout. They played a critical role in the election of current UAW President Shawn Fain and in founding the Unite All Workers for Democracy faction, which now effectively runs the union. Their role as a public relations firm for the union is such that former *Labor Notes* staff writer Jonah Furman has since become head of the UAW's Communications Department.

When *Labor Notes'* article on Allison Transmission was first posted on February 7, more than 8,000 layoffs had already been announced at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis. But *Labor Notes* has still not written anything on this, because doing so would expose their stumping for the new Big Three auto contracts and limited "standup strike" last fall, which the UAW bureaucracy designed to avoid seriously impacting production.

The contract rammed through last month at Allison Transmission, under dubious circumstances, was almost identical to one which workers rejected by 96 percent last December. Instead of calling an immediate strike, which 99 percent of Allison workers voted to authorize, the UAW delayed for weeks, even cynically claiming workers could not strike due to a "clerical error" in legally-required strike notice paperwork.

The contract includes pay rates that fails to bring workers back to what they made, adjusted for inflation, more than a decade ago; maintains a huge four-year pay progression; and allows the company to operate Plant 14, which produces transmissions for the military, as it sees fit.

Worst of all, by keeping workers on the job, the UAW continued the flow of military hardware into both Ukraine and Gaza. Allison produces transmissions for the Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle, which factored heavily in the bloody and pointless frontal assaults by the Ukrainian military on Russian positions last year.

It also supplies transmissions for Israel's Eitan Armored Fighting Vehicle, which has been deployed as part of Israel's genocidal war against the people of the Gaza Strip.

In other words, the scale of the sellout can be measured not only by the ongoing poverty of Allison workers, but in human lives. The continuation of production of Israeli military hardware makes the UAW bureaucracy a party to genocide. Only a few days after forcing through the contract, the bureaucracy endorsed "Genocide Joe" Biden for president and threw out pro-Palestinian protesters from the meeting hall. Both the sellout at Allison and its support for Biden exposes the ceasefire resolution passed in December as a complete sham, designed to pull the wool over the eyes of workers.

In response to the UAW's betrayal, workers founded the Allison Transmission Workers Rank-and-File Committee. "We need to take control of the situation ourselves," the committee wrote in December. "Fain is working directly with the Biden administration. They are determined that there be no disruption to war plans and that the war profiteers keep making billions through the exploitation of workers."

The rank-and-file committee called for the removal of the UAW bargaining committee and UAW Region 2B Director David Green, and their replacement by trusted shop floor militants, as well as emergency meetings in preparation for a strike.

Green's role was especially significant, given his previous involvement in the closure of GM's Lordstown, Ohio, plant and in the sellout of the Clarios battery strike earlier last year.

The *Labor Notes* article is a complete inversion of reality, starting with the headline: "Strike Threat at Allison Transmission Strips Out Tiers." This is the opposite of what happened. By *blocking* a strike, the bureaucracy imposed a contract which effectively *retains* tiers through a four-year wage progression.

"Workers clinched a contract in the nick of time—by presenting a clear picture of what would happen if they walked," author Luis Feliz Leon writes. "Allison could have lost millions a day in revenue, taken a reputational hit, and lost customers ... And even if it tried bringing in scabs, the truck drivers who deliver transmissions to customers wouldn't cross the picket line. Some were Teamsters; others at Ryder Logistics were fellow UAW Local 933 members."

In reality, the UAW announced its "second" contract not in the "nick of time" but after weeks of delays. This turn of phrase, however, is also a slip of the tongue, expressing relief that the UAW was narrowly able to prevent a strike which could have cost

Allison millions in profits, and worse, invited solidarity action by other workers. At any rate, the UAW actually told workers that they would send Ryder workers across the picket line in the event of a strike.

The article does not quote a single rank-and-file worker, only members of the bargaining team and local bureaucracy, who portray the contract in the best possible light. They and *Labor Notes* self-servingly present the contract as having been “won” through rank-and-file “solidarity” led by local UAW officials.

Leon glosses over the rejection of the first contract by 96 percent, which he dishonestly presents as “Allison’s offer.” In fact, the contract was endorsed by both UAW President Fain and Region 2B Director Green. In other words, the contract was not simply a rejection of “management’s offer,” it was a vote of no confidence in the UAW bureaucracy.

“The company realized this time around that we weren’t joking,” *Labor Notes* quotes shop committeeman Darrin Nelson as saying. “We were walking—making it very clear it was either put up or shut up.” In reality, while *workers* were determined to strike, the UAW *bureaucrats* were determined from the start to prevent a walkout. Leon does not mention the union’s use of a “clerical error” to delay strike action while it prepared a second vote.

Nelson, in fact, was actively campaigning for the contract which workers had rejected. “He flat out told us face-to-face that he felt like this is one of the best contracts,” one worker told the WWS. But *Labor Notes* dishonestly casts him as a shop floor militant, even while admitting that he attended the 2014 UAW Convention as an alternate delegate.

The article almost entirely omits the role of the UAW International, which Leon claims “workers credit” only for “providing legal and communications support.” It also neglects to mention David Green, who actually led the talks. As for UAW President Shawn Fain, the only reference to him comes in an anecdote from plant chair George Freeman, who allegedly “joked when sitting across from company negotiators that they’d bring in hard-charging, Indiana-native UAW President Shawn Fain. The threat threw management off balance,” Leon claimed.

This is absurd. The company knew they had nothing to fear from Fain, who endorsed the first contract and had just rammed through a sellout in the auto industry.

In reality, the struggle took the form of a rebellion against the union apparatus, not bureaucrats marching hand-in-hand with workers, as *Labor Notes* would have its readers believe.

Their goal is to quarantine the rebellion at Allison to prevent the contagion from spreading. Thus, they deal with the enormous rank-and-file anger by simply refusing to mention it. Above all, they maintain a deliberate silence on the role of the Allison Transmission Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which was the sole organized force consistently opposed to the bureaucracy’s pro-corporate demands.

Shamefully, *Labor Notes* says nothing at all about the company’s connection to the genocide in Gaza. The article mentions in passing that the Pentagon is one of Allison’s customers, as though there were nothing unusual or significant about that.

Even if everything that *Labor Notes* writes about the Allison

contract were true, that the mere threat of a strike was enough to secure significant gains, the fact that the UAW has kept production going during the Gaza genocide is a massive betrayal in itself.

It is an elementary duty of the working class, and a basic test of any organization claiming to represent workers, to oppose oppression anywhere in the world. By refusing to call out Allison workers, the UAW prevented them from fulfilling this duty.

The Palestinian trade unions issued a call last year for workers around the world to carry out industrial action to halt the flow of weapons into Israel. That statement, as well as a video by socialist autoworker Will Lehman calling for action in the auto industry, has received wide support in the working class. But the bureaucracy in the UAW and every other trade union have refused even to acknowledge it, even in cases where they pretend to support a ceasefire.

*Labor Notes* is not simply apologizing for the bureaucracy. They are a part of it. They played a critical role in getting Fain elected in 2022. Their members—long based within sections of the union apparatus—have moved into the highest positions in the UAW bureaucracy nationally, with the six-figure salaries and privileges that go along with them.

*Labor Notes* gave its support to an operation by the federal government to refurbish the union’s image after years of massive corruption scandals embroiled the top leadership. They opposed the campaign of Will Lehman, who ran for union president on a platform of abolishing the union apparatus and transferring power to the rank and file. And for all their pretensions to be fighting for “union democracy,” they also ignored evidence of widespread voter suppression which denied tens of thousands of workers the right to vote.

*Labor Notes* has specialized since its inception in promoting “progressive” or “democratic” factions in the bureaucracy as an alternative to a rebellion by the rank and file against the apparatus. In addition to Unite All Workers for Democracy, they are also heavily involved with Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which plays a similar role in the new Teamsters administration under Sean O’Brien. As with the UAW’s auto contract, the Teamsters last year pushed through a sellout at UPS which paved the way for thousands of job cuts now underway.

Along with the Democratic Socialists of America—into which *Labor Notes* has become deeply integrated—they are also playing a key role in the labor policy of the Biden administration, which is to use the services of the union bureaucracy to limit strikes, enforce substandard contracts which do not keep pace with inflation, and impose labor discipline as the US careens into world war.

In order to leverage its immense social power, the working class has to break the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy. This includes taking the measure of all pseudo-left adjuncts of the bureaucracy such as *Labor Notes*, which work to prevent such a rebellion.



To contact the WWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wws.org/contact](https://wws.org/contact)**