

# Labor Notes opens 2024 conference after helping push through massive sellouts in auto, UPS

Tom Hall  
18 April 2024

*Labor Notes* is holding its conference this weekend in Chicago under conditions in which it has helped to carry out massive betrayals of the working class.

The organization's last conference, two years ago, was addressed by new Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien, "democratic socialist" Senator Bernie Sanders and others. They hailed *Labor Notes*-sponsored union factions Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Unite All Workers for Democracy, which had entered and were about to enter into the leadership of the Teamsters and United Auto Workers, as the leading edge of a reform movement in the American trade unions.

What have been the results? Only months after the last conference, the Teamsters and other unions worked with the Biden administration to prevent and ultimately ban a national strike by railroad workers.

Since the ratification of supposed "historic" contracts at UPS and in the auto industry last year, thousands of workers have lost their jobs. UPS says it will close 200 facilities and automate "everything," made possible by the new contract. Thousands of jobs have already been cut in the auto industry this year, with countless more on the chopping block as the industry shifts towards electric vehicles.

Everything that *Labor Notes*, TDU and UAWD claimed about the new administrations that they are part of and the new contracts that they helped to pass has been exposed as lies. Instead, they are helping to enforce what will prove to be the deepest attacks on jobs in decades. In coauthoring these sellouts, *Labor Notes* is also playing a political function for the ruling class. It is helping impose discipline on the working class, through the medium of the trade union bureaucracy, as US imperialism prepares to expand its wars across the world.

In return, members of TDU, *Labor Notes* and UAWD have now been elevated into positions of power within the union apparatus. The two factions have members on the executive boards of both unions making over \$200,000 a year. Former *Labor Notes* editor Jonah Furman is now the communications director of the UAW, where his main job is to prevent workers from being informed about the mass layoffs.

At this year's conference, the real experience of the past two

years will be systematically covered up.

The organizers, attempting to divert the critical thinking of attendees through endless singing and chanting, will present the "labor movement" as going from one success to the next.

The layoffs will be minimized or not mentioned at all. Typical titles for conference events include "The UAW's New Organizing Drive," "Rebuilding a Fighting UAW" and "How We're Turning Our Unions Around." Incredibly, one event on the railroads is titled "Using the Railway Labor Act to Our Advantage," a reference to the anti-worker law used for 100 years to ban strikes in the rail and airline industries.

The conference will also have the character of an official spectacle. Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson, who is endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America, will be present, little more than a week after the brutal police murder of Dexter Reed by the city's police force.

So will Shawn Fain, who only a week ago dined on prime rib in the White House at a state reception for the Japanese prime minister. Named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people and CNN Business' labor leader of the year, Fain's elevation to national prominence has been assisted by support from *Labor Notes* and UAWD.

Since its founding nearly fifty years ago, *Labor Notes* has insisted on a policy of "no politics," which they claim only divides workers. All that is needed, they assert, is militant struggles carried out within the framework of the trade unions.

At the last conference, the speakers explicitly opposed a break with the Democrats. Flight attendants' union President Sara Nelson claimed, "If we start seeing ourselves as a working class," then the two capitalist parties "will come to us."

The capitalist parties have given answer to this claim in the form of mass repression, especially against anti-war protesters. On the eve of this year's conference, New York police arrested Columbia University students protesting the Gaza genocide and herded them en masse into police vans.

In fact, "no politics" has always meant no *socialist* politics, and supporting the domination of *capitalist* politics over the working class. Indeed, *Labor Notes* itself is playing an important political role in the broader attempts by the ruling

class to head off a political movement in the working class. And the labor bureaucracy, in which it is now playing a leading part, functions as little more than an extension of the capitalist state.

The ruling class, and especially the Democratic Party, see the union bureaucracy as critical in preparing American society for war against Russia, China and Iran. The corrupt union officials are drawing together with US corporations and the Biden White House into a corporatist alliance.

At every one of Fain's five joint appearances since November with Biden, war has been a central theme. In policy speeches, Biden has repeatedly invoked the "Arsenal of Democracy"—the American war economy during World War II, as the example to be followed today. A critical element in that was a "no-strike pledge" by union officials.

When Biden accepted the UAW's nomination for his re-election, he declared that workers had to build "aircraft carriers and tanks." Meanwhile, the UAW bureaucracy threw out genocide protesters from the meeting hall. Fain returned the favor in a visit by Biden to Detroit where, protected from protesters by a line of riot cops, Fain pledged to send UAW members "to war" for the president.

Under conditions in which the ruling class is catapulting towards war and dictatorship, the right-wing essence of this program is becoming clearer. In a recent article in *Jacobin*, longtime former TDU organizer Ken Paff suggested that TDU is even prepared to support Trump and other fascists within the Republican Party.

"The Teamster leadership's meeting with Donald Trump as part of the union's endorsement process sparked controversy and discussion both in and outside the union," he blandly declared. "TDU members and other Teamsters have a range of takes on this strategy." In fact, the Teamsters bureaucracy is openly supporting the extreme right, and it is entirely possible it will endorse Trump. They have also donated \$45,000 to the Republican National Committee and \$5,000 to Senator Josh Hawley, a key player in the January 6 coup attempt.

According to Paff, reasonable minds can disagree on whether to support a fascist for president. But what they absolutely cannot tolerate is any opposition to the genocide. "Many TDU members are politically active around issues like organizing for a cease-fire in Gaza," he wrote. "But we do not try to convert TDU into a political vehicle. From early on in TDU, we have tacked hard against this impulse." They "tacked hard" against this by bureaucratically suppressing and shouting down discussion of a ceasefire resolution at its last convention.

"TDU's goal is not a narrow, perfect program. It is to have a wide, deep impact in the Teamsters and in the labor movement," he concluded. In reality, the goal of TDU and *Labor Notes* is to prevent the emergence of a mass anti-war and anti-capitalist movement in the working class, the only social force which can put a stop to war.

Many of the events this weekend at *Labor Notes* are aimed at

passing ceasefire resolutions in the unions. But this is only in service of the same aim. Rather than organize the working class in a fight against war, *Labor Notes* propose toothless resolutions passed by pro-war bureaucrats. Fain and the UAW passed a "ceasefire" resolution last December, only a few weeks before endorsing "Genocide Joe's" re-election.

Under conditions in which *Labor Notes* has been relentlessly promoted, many of the 4,500 in attendance this weekend will no doubt consist of politically-inexperienced workers and youth who hope it will help them to make contact with a working class movement. Still others, angry at their being used as in the "strike ready" campaign at UPS in order to promote the Teamsters' sellout, may attend to try and pressure the organization to the left.

But if they want to build a movement in the working class against exploitation, they will have to draw the necessary conclusions. The pro-corporate bureaucracy cannot be "reformed." It must be destroyed. This means the formation of new organs of power, rank-and-file committees, genuinely controlled by workers and prepared to fight a two front war against both management and the union apparatus. Such committees are being built in the auto industry, in UPS and in countless other workplaces all over the world, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

This must be connected with the fight for socialism. Workers cannot carry out purely "economic" struggles while ignoring the drive to World War III, the collapse of American democracy or the union bureaucracy's role in both. They have to build a movement to counterpose to the capitalist program of militarism and inequality the socialist program of ending private ownership and the nation-state system.

But this is precisely what *Labor Notes* directs its efforts to preventing. It and other pseudo-left groupings serve an objective social function for the ruling class. They disrupt and confuse growing opposition from below, turning it back behind the bureaucracy and the capitalist parties where it can be smothered.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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