

Labor Notes' 2024 conference stumps for world war, pro-genocide Democrats

Tom Hall
24 April 2024

Last weekend's *Labor Notes* conference marked a new stage in the effort of the pseudo-left and the trade union bureaucracy to promote war and suppress the class struggle.

Over three days, the conference promoted the lying narrative that the pro-corporate union bureaucracy has been reformed and is now leading a resurgent working class movement. This presentation could only be made by completely ignoring the mass layoffs underway at UPS and in the auto industry, following contract betrayals last year in which *Labor Notes*-backed "reform" groups, Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Unite All Workers for Democracy, played a crucial role.

In remarks to the opening session, *Labor Notes* editor Alexandra Bradbury bragged that turnout was the biggest ever, with more than 4,500 in attendance. "It is an exciting time in the labor movement," she said. "Two years ago, we heard ... from UPS Teamsters who were preparing a grassroots contract campaign to put an end to two-tier wages. Well, they did it! And we heard from autoworkers ... who were building a movement to turn their union around, and did they ever do it!"

In reality, what has dominated the class struggle is the collision between the growing movement of the working class and the obstacles in the trade union apparatus. Workers are increasingly drawing the conclusion that a rebellion to smash, rather than reform, the bureaucracy is needed, reflected in the growth of rank-and-file committees.

Meanwhile, the bureaucracy is closing ranks with the government, with the Biden administration developing a corporatist alliance to impose discipline on the "home front." But the ability of the bureaucracy to play its apportioned role depends on its credibility in the working class, or at least the presence of sufficient illusions among workers to prevent an open rebellion.

The most dangerous outcome, from the standpoint of US and world capitalism, is the elevation of workers' attention beyond immediate contract fights towards the more fundamental struggle for socialism and against the capitalist system itself.

Labor Notes, which for decades has denied that workers need "politics," by which they mean socialist politics, thus plays a crucial political function for the bourgeoisie by promoting a union apparatus which functions as a central pillar of class rule.

Arrests of genocide protesters at conference

This accounts for the character of the conference as essentially an official event. It began with a speech by the mayor of Chicago, Brandon Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union official who earlier in the week sent Chicago police against anti-genocide protesters.

"This was a conference I had the chance to hang out back in 2012," Johnson said, interspersed by shouts against his attacks on protesters. That

year, the CTU, under the "rank-and-file" CORE faction, sold out a citywide teachers strike, paving the way for mass school closures. Twelve years later, the group *Labor Notes* hailed at the time as the spearhead of a union "reform" movement produced the pro-imperialist mayor Johnson.

In spite of their best efforts, social reality began to intrude on the event almost as soon as it began. As Johnson prepared to speak, police began arresting anti-genocide protesters gathered outside of the venue.

Shortly after Johnson spoke, demonstrators forced their way into the hall (after *Labor Notes* organizers unsuccessfully attempted to bar the doors) and temporarily shut down the proceedings. Bradbury, stunned, eventually regained composure and began leading a chant of "Ceasefire Now!" to restore order, claiming "I think we've got a lot of agreement on that." She continued: "The power we have to do that is in our power as organized workers ... and that is what we are going to keep building this weekend."

In fact, the claim that the conference "had a lot of agreement" on a ceasefire is not true. Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which featured prominently at the conference, opposed a ceasefire resolution even at its own convention last November. At any rate, if it were true that *Labor Notes* really opposed the genocide, they would not have invited someone involved in a nationwide crackdown on the genocide protests.

As for "building the power" of the working class, *Labor Notes* in reality directed all of its efforts over the weekend, as it does in general, to bolstering bureaucrats with close ties to pro-war Democrats and even fascist Republicans.

Another remarkable exchange that exposed the extreme fragility of the conference took place later Friday night, when a young UPS worker attempted to ask General President Sean O'Brien several critical questions about the new contract, including the continued presence of two-tier wages. Demonstrating both contempt and real fear of the rank-and-file, O'Brien literally ran away, claiming, "I gotta catch a flight."

UAW president stumps for WWII

The conference ended Sunday afternoon with a speech by Shawn Fain, who gave a filthy warmongering speech. Wearing a hoodie with the phrase "Workers are the Arsenal of Democracy" and a silhouette of a World War II bomber, Fain declared that workers were "the greatest army in the world."

Fain probably intended his audience to believe that he was merely speaking about the class war. In fact, the "Arsenal of Democracy" refers to a no-strike pledge enforced by the union officials during World War II, as well as their support in the prosecution of anti-war socialists, such as the Trotskyists active in the Teamsters in Minneapolis.

Fain's speech was clearly written largely by the White House. Biden has repeatedly used the same theme of the "Arsenal of Democracy" over

the past several months, expressing the fact that Washington is preparing American society to escalate from proxy wars to massive direct US interventions.

In his speech accepting the UAW's endorsement, during which bureaucrats threw genocide protesters out of the venue, Biden returned to this theme by declaring that Americans now, as back then, had to produce "aircraft carriers and tanks."

The UAW's greatest achievement, according to Fain, was the role it supposedly played in winning World War II. Fain boasted in particular that UAW members produced B-24 Liberator bombers at Ford's Willow Run plant near Detroit.

Fain claimed that, when Biden symbolically visited the site of the plant during the UAW's phony "standup strike" last year, the UAW president told him that workers today "face a new authoritarian threat: corporate greed."

But Fain's embrace of World War II rhetoric really signifies that he and the bureaucracy are prepared to offer up workers as an industrial "army" for a third world war.

If Fain were being honest, what he is really advocating is not an "Arsenal of Democracy," but an "Arsenal of Genocide." This time, the target is not Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan, but Russia and China, who bore the brunt of the Axis Powers' attacks, as well as Gaza, Iran and countless other former-colonial peoples.

***Labor Notes* hails Chattanooga VW vote**

One dominant element at the conference was a spirit of triumphalism over the results, announced Friday night, of the vote to join the UAW by Volkswagen workers in Chattanooga, Tennessee. No doubt workers voted for the UAW because they want to organize a fight against management.

But workers' illusions in the bureaucratically controlled UAW will be quickly shattered once the UAW comes into the plant and begins setting up the sort of corrupt relations with management that it has long cultivated in the Detroit 3 automakers. A critical role in promoting these relations was played by *Labor Notes* itself, which has helped cover up the role of the apparatus in imposing layoffs at plants in Detroit.

The outcome at Chattanooga was also the result of an unprecedented promotion by the Biden administration, which sees extending the UAW bureaucracy's presence into currently non-union plants in the South as a useful means of imposing discipline on workers.

Biden campaigned relentlessly in favor of the UAW. After the vote totals were released, he issued a press release congratulating workers on their "historic vote."

On Saturday, a panel took place on "Organizing the South," where the VW vote was celebrated as the beginning of a massive unionization drive across region. The choice of the panel's chair, Jacob Morrison, the co-host of the Valley Labor Report radio show in Birmingham, Alabama, speaks volumes about the real social interests animating the campaign. Morrison is a man on the make. He is the AFG Local 1858's assistant vice president, where he oversees federal employees at the Redstone Arsenal, playing a role ensuring military production.

The miseducation of youth

Connected to the conference's goal of reinforcing the authority of the union bureaucracy was its systematic miseducation of the young people in

attendance. Whatever genuine motives accounted for the presence of many of them, the event itself was aimed at fashioning them into the next generation of union bureaucrats.

The proceedings encouraged a deeply cynical, pragmatic obsession with immediate organizational "results" and a disdain for historical and principled questions. Workshops were devoted to organizational questions, such as how to run for office or organize a union election campaign. Many promoted identity and racial politics, which are used by the ruling class to obscure the deeper and more fundamental class divisions in society.

Several panels were held on Gaza, but only from the standpoint of ensuring the passage of toothless ceasefire measures that the pro-war union bureaucrats will never act on. Fain, whom *Labor Notes* virtually crowned as the leader of the American working class, combines two-faced support for an empty UAW "ceasefire" resolution with the closest ties to "Genocide Joe."

Another major element of the conference was a distorted "internationalism" presented by union bureaucrats from other countries, where they are also helping enforce mass layoffs. They advocated not a global movement of the working class against capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system, but a collection of separate national struggles, under the control of the labor bureaucracies in each country, to reverse globalization and revive the old national economies.

This was put most crudely by Cesar Orta, a Mexican trade union official from The Independent Union of Audi Mexico Workers (SITAUDI). This is one of the new "independent" unions set up with the support of the US State Department in Mexico over the last several years to get in front of the growing rebellion against the established Mexican unions. Indeed, at the start of his speech, Orta thanked the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, which has spent decades working with the CIA's operations against workers' struggles across Latin America.

During Sunday's closing session, Orta promoted America First nationalism, declaring: "these companies are using the distance and low wages [in Mexico] to divide us. That's why we have to unite to *keep US jobs in the US* [emphasis added] and improve the salaries and working conditions of workers in Mexico."

To be blunt, this is the program of Trump. It has also been the program of the American union bureaucrats for decades. It has never saved a single job, but only sown national and racial animus and allowed companies to whipsaw American and Mexican workers against each other.

The conference was incapable of, indeed hostile to, dealing with principled questions. A repeated refrain throughout the sessions was that "we have our differences, and that makes us stronger."

In part, this was an attempt to paper over the complete lack of any principled agreement on anything among the attendees. Youth opposed to the Gaza genocide attended the conference alongside its enablers and outright supporters such as Fain and Johnson.

At bottom, the "embrace of differences" means that young people and workers who are moving to the left should embrace "unity" with pro-war Democrats and union bureaucrats. It means upholding the "right" of *Labor Notes* itself and the institutions it backs to say one thing and do another, by discouraging workers and young people from thinking through political issues to their conclusion and drawing the necessary lessons from them.

Bureaucratic "self-reform" vs rank-and-file committees

Above all, the *Labor Notes* conference was directed against the emergence of a rank-and-file rebellion against the union bureaucracy and

the fight for an independent, socialist program in the working class.

Since its founding nearly 50 years ago, *Labor Notes* has rejected any deeper analysis into the social and economic causes for the betrayals of the union bureaucracy. Instead, they argued that all that was necessary was to replace “bad” bureaucrats with “good” ones, who would supposedly organize the unions “from the ground up, not the top down.”

This was connected with their rejection of “politics,” by which they always meant *socialist* politics. It never prevented them from establishing the closest links to capitalist politicians.

Such an analysis on the causes of the transformation of the bureaucracy was actually undertaken by the International Committee of the Fourth International. It concluded that this was fundamentally connected to their nationalist, pro-capitalist and anti-socialist program, which was rendered completely unviable by the emergence of the globalized economy.

On this basis, the ICFI concluded that the bureaucracy could not be reformed, but only smashed and replaced with new organs of power, rank-and-file committees, which would fight to unite workers across national boundaries and industries into a powerful movement against the profit system.

Today, *Labor Notes* functions as a public relations and consulting firm for the bureaucracy, specializing in how to cover up for its betrayals through the use of left and militant-sounding rhetoric.

One element of Fain’s otherwise deceitful speech did ring true: his emphasis on *Labor Notes*’ influence on his own policies. At one point, he held up the group’s *Troublemaker’s Handbook*, which he called his “bible,” and opened it up to a chapter on “company unionism,” showing the audience his hand-written notes and highlighted passages. This said more than he intended.

Labor Notes’ support for capitalist politics and the betrayals of the bureaucracy will expose it before workers and youth. In fact, they themselves are already anticipating this. Their first online webinar after the conference is titled “What To Do When Your Union Breaks Your Heart.”

The task which workers really confront is a struggle against the union bureaucracy, through the development of rank-and-file committees and the fight for socialist internationalism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact