

Report to the SEP (US) Eighth National Congress

# The SEP intervention in the UAW election and the fight for socialism among autoworkers

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*We are publishing here the report to the Eighth Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US), given by Jerry White. The congress was held from August 4 to August 9, 2024. It unanimously adopted two resolutions, “The 2024 US elections and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party” and “Free Bogdan Syrotiuk!”*

I would like to supplement Comrade Tom Hall’s report with a review of the Socialist Equality Party’s intervention in the United Auto Workers election in 2022–23, and the ongoing struggle among autoworkers. The lessons of the Will Lehman campaign will be critical in the fight to break the grip of the pro-capitalist and pro-war UAW bureaucracy, build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and win workers to an internationalist and socialist perspective. As the Congress resolution states, this will be central to the SEP campaign in the 2024 US elections.

There is no doubt that the UAW apparatus has emerged as a central instrument in American imperialism’s plans for global war, and the Democratic Party is intensifying its efforts to refurbish its image. Kamala Harris and Tim Walz were in Detroit today holding a meeting with UAW President Shawn Fain at the union’s Solidarity House headquarters. After keeping the location of their joint rally secret, they announced it will be held in an airplane hangar at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, as far away from anti-genocide protests as possible.

Our last party Congress started on July 31, 2022, just four days after Will Lehman was nominated at the UAW Constitutional Convention. Our summer school in 2023 followed a year of intensive campaigning to bring the party’s program to autoworkers.

At the end of his opening report to the school, Comrade David North said:

The intervention of the party in the UAW election provided an insight into the consciousness of the working class. The candidacy of Comrade Will Lehman, who openly stated his socialist convictions and called for the abolition of the apparatus, won the support of 5,000 autoworkers. And thousands more would have voted for him had they even known of the election. But the bureaucracy, which recognizes and fears the growth of political radicalism and the movement toward socialism, did everything in its power to block participation of workers in the election.

North continued:

The Lehman campaign is one significant demonstration of the SEP’s leadership of militant opposition within the working class to the bureaucratic apparatuses of the reactionary trade unions. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, initiated by the party, is developing within the United States and internationally as a genuine movement of militant workers in factories and workplaces throughout the country.

The decades-long crisis in the UAW bureaucracy, manifested in the exposure of widespread bribe-taking and corruption, repeated revolts by autoworkers and the decision by the US government to hold the first-ever direct election of top UAW officers, presented an enormous opportunity to the party to fight for its program. Whatever challenges running a campaign for UAW president would pose—and there were many—we could not allow this opportunity to pass. Without intervening, it would not be possible to have an accurate picture of the “objective situation,” let alone to change it.

Between the June 30, 2022, announcement of Will’s candidacy and the latest article produced by Marcus Day on the UAW’s endorsement of Harris on August 1—a period of 26 months—the WSWS posted no fewer than 580 articles on the struggles of autoworkers.

This body of work was the product of intensive theoretical, political and practical work by the SEP to provide leadership to the working class and provide it with a perspective and program for its struggles. Comrade Will ran in the election as a representative of a powerful, international revolutionary movement, the ICFI.

The intervention of the Trotskyist movement in the struggles of autoworkers, of course, dates back decades, to before the founding of the UAW in 1935. Workers influenced by or won to the movement played prominent roles in the 1934 Toledo Auto-Lite strike and the Flint sit-down of 1936–37 and organized the mass demonstrations in Detroit against the Taft-Hartley law in 1947.

The postwar boom and consolidation of the pro-imperialist bureaucracy under Reuther posed severe challenges to this work. As Comrade David North wrote in *The Heritage We Defend*, James P. Cannon, the leader of the American Trotskyists, waged a decisive fight in 1953 against the American Pabloites led by Bert Cochran, who was responsible for the party’s work in the UAW in Detroit. Declaring that you could never win American workers by “straightening them out on the rights and wrongs of the Stalin-Trotsky fight,” Cochran found support principally among a section of trade unionists inside the party who, in the face of the rabid McCarthyite witch-hunt, had lost all confidence in a revolutionary

perspective.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Workers League waged a powerful struggle among autoworkers, opposing the corporatism of the UAW bureaucracy and its collusion in the destruction of the jobs of more than 1 million UAW members.

As Comrade North noted in his opening report, the International Committee's 1988 perspectives document analyzed the globalization of capitalist production, the emergence of transnational corporations, and the transformation of the nationally-based trade union and reformist organizations into corporatist instruments of the ruling class. Because of this, the working class had to have an international strategy and coordinate its struggles on a global scale.

The last 15 years have seen a qualitative development in the rebellion against the UAW apparatus and in the influence of the party. This includes our key role in the rejection of the 2015 Chrysler contract; the 2019 demonstration against GM plant closures, and the linking together of American workers with Mexican workers in Silao and Matamoros; the 2020 wave of wildcat strikes over the spread of COVID in the plants; and the 2021 strike by Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia.

Frightened by this rank-and-file revolt and the growing support for the SEP, the Biden administration set out to refurbish the image of the discredited UAW bureaucracy. This was key to the corporatist strategy of the "most pro-union president in history," to suppress the class struggle and discipline the working class for "complete war."

The effort to smoothly install a new figurehead was disrupted by the intervention of the SEP. As Comrade Eric London wrote in a March 21, 2023, perspective:

From the start, the UAW election was stage-managed by the state to resolve the crisis in the UAW stemming from the corruption scandal. Its aim was to provide the UAW apparatus with window dressing and to put in place a leadership with enough legitimacy to restrain the brewing rebellion of the rank-and-file. This plan could succeed only insofar as the rank-and-file had no representation on the ballot and could only choose from hand-selected bureaucrats representing different cliques.

Will Lehman's campaign threw a monkey wrench into this plan. Lehman ran on a socialist program and campaigned for abolishing the UAW bureaucracy and giving power to the rank and file on the shop floor. He ran as a member of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and was supported by the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site*.

The response of the bureaucracy and the court-appointed UAW monitor was to engage in a systematic effort to suppress turnout and deprive rank-and-file workers of the chance to vote for Lehman.

Despite this, through scores of statements, videos, in the September 22 UAW presidential debate and campaigns by party members we advanced the fight to abolish the bureaucracy, transfer power to the workers on the shop floor and "normalized" the fight for the international unity of the working class and socialism.

At one point, the major trucking industry publication pointed to the "Lehman factor" as providing leadership to the rebellion at Mack Trucks and said there was a "pretty good socialist fervor inside this negotiation now."

The statements issued by the campaign during the elections and afterward spoke not only to immediate struggles, but fundamental political issues, including the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza and the threat of dictatorship.

Responding to one such statement, a worker at the GE Aerospace plant in Cincinnati told us:

All the other candidates in the debate were run-of-the-mill. Will had substance and was different. When we saw Will's ad in *Solidarity Magazine* the two of us couldn't believe it. We said either he is a socialist or this is some right-wing guy posturing by using populist rhetoric. We started following Will. Then we got his letter calling for the freedom of Julian Assange, and we said this makes too much sense. It was great to have somebody speaking for us. We began speaking to guys at work and they say, "I'll vote for him." We know not all of them agree with socialism or understand it, but they see somebody who is giving them hope and has their interests as workers.

During the election campaign, the SEP emerged as the only defender of the democratic rights of workers. We exposed the deliberate suppression of votes and the sanctioning of this by the UAW monitor and the Biden administration, and we rallied workers to file affidavits and take other actions to defend their right to vote in a meaningful election. By contrast, the Democratic Socialists of America operatives backing Fain, like Biden's Labor Department, showed nothing but contempt for the rights of workers.

After the installation of Fain as UAW president in March 2023, a meeting organized by the SEP to establish an Autoworkers Network of Rank-and-File Committees declared:

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...

This warning was vindicated over the next several months, as Fain and the White House sought to suppress the rebellion of the rank and file with the bogus "stand up strike" and impose a contract that would pave the way for massive job cuts to make workers pay for the geostrategically important transition to electric vehicles.

On August 30, 2022, the IWA-RFC published the statement "Stop the EV jobs bloodbath!" which warned of the massive attack that was coming. It also explained that the

US government views the effort to build a domestic supply line for EVs and secure access to critical minerals required for the production of microchips and semiconductors as a matter of military necessity, so that it does not have to rely on China to produce military equipment and maintain an industrial base.

This is the significance of Fain and Biden's repeated references to the "Arsenal of Democracy." On October 7, 2023, the very day Israel began its war in Gaza, Fain spelled this out. "Reuther," he said, "had a vision of converting excess capacity to produce airplanes and tanks," but he was "laughed at and mocked by the Big 3 CEOs, who said stay in your lane."

He continued:

When Pearl Harbor happened, FDR 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.

Fain, no doubt, hopes a Harris administration will prove the correctness of Trotsky's famous statement: "In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers."

What did this Arsenal of Democracy mean for the working class?

In the 11 months before Pearl Harbor, there were 4,288 strikes, involving 2.3 million workers, against rising inflation and poverty wages. In June 1941, Roosevelt deployed federal troops to break a strike by 12,000 North American Aviation workers in Inglewood, California, which erupted in defiance of the pro-war AFL and CIO bureaucracies. When US troops with bayonets attacked pickets, shouts of "Heil Roosevelt!" broke out from the workers' ranks, SWP member Art Preis wrote in his book *Labor's Giant Step*.

He continued:

Thus, the United States government waged its first military engagement of World War II on American soil against American workers resisting hunger wages.

A month later, in July 1941, Roosevelt, with the backing of the Teamsters bureaucracy and the Stalinists, would frame up 18 Trotskyists under the infamous Smith Act in a trial aimed at crushing all opposition within the American working class to the entry of US imperialism into the Second World War.

Reuther, Sidney Hillman and other union leaders, fully supported by the now pro-war Stalinists, adopted a no-strike pledge, accepted a wartime wage freeze, the elimination of premium pay for weekend work and in many industries a ban on workers leaving their jobs without permits on penalty of being drafted for military service. In return, the unions were granted "maintenance of membership" protections, compelling workers to pay dues.

Wartime strikes, including the wildcats by hundreds of thousands of coal miners in 1943, continued. In effect, the American ruling class barely controlled its "home front" in World War II under far more favorable conditions than today.

American imperialism is now embarking on a deeply unpopular war for global domination without any union or political leaders who have credibility in the working class. This is not taking place after a period of New Deal reformism—a luxury at the time, which Trotsky said was dependent on America's unprecedented wealth—but after a period of nearly a half-century of social counter-revolution and ruthless attacks on the social position of the working class.

It is highly significant that the campaign received substantial votes from workers in the defense industry, including General Dynamics plants in Ohio and Virginia, and the Allison Transmission plant in Indianapolis, which produce military vehicles for the US and Israel. In opposition to the bogus ceasefire resolution of the UAW bureaucracy, Will issued a TikTok video in November 2023, calling on workers to halt the production and shipment of weapons to Israel, which was viewed hundreds of thousands of times.

The campaign also won a substantial following among UAW members

at the University of California, and when 48,000 grad students and other workers launched a political strike against the genocide and repression of campus protests in May-June 2024, the party was the only force to intervene with a political program and initiatives to expand the struggle and oppose the UAW bureaucracy's isolation of it.

On June 25, 2024, a federal judge upheld Will's lawsuit against the Biden administration's Labor Department over its refusal to act on his complaints of systematic voter suppression in the UAW elections.

In a July 4 perspective, titled, "Demand a new UAW election! All power to the rank and file!," the IWA-RFC stated:

The exposure of election fraud, combined with the continued sellout of workers' interests and corruption, makes an indisputable case for the holding of a new UAW election.

But workers cannot rely on the Labor Department, the UAW monitor or the courts to defend their rights. If a genuinely democratic election is to be held, rank-and-file workers must fight for it and oversee it.

The statement continued:

The only way a re-vote will not produce another corporate-government stooge is if this process is connected to the fight to construct new organs of independent self-determination of workers themselves.

Throughout the UAW election campaign and the contract struggle, the SEP assisted workers in setting up rank-and-file committees in Detroit, Dearborn, Lansing, Flint, Toledo, Kokomo, Chicago and other areas. These committees debated and discussed political and tactical issues, issued programmatic statements and demands, and gave expression, in an embryonic fashion, to the striving of workers to establish self-determination.

But the party confronts many political challenges in recruiting these workers and resolving the crisis of leadership. Despite the growing militancy, workers remain under the influence of capitalist politics. In this election campaign, we must wage a determined struggle to break workers from the Democratic Party and the reactionary influence of Trump and his effort to divert economic and political discontent by scapegoating immigrants and building a fascistic movement.

This means intensifying the struggle against the pseudo-left organizations, which have increasingly been integrated into the trade union bureaucracy. When the IC was drawing the most far-reaching conclusions from the globalization of production, the proponents of "union reform" where claiming that nothing fundamental had occurred.

In 1988, the state capitalist Kim Moody, a principal founder of *Labor Notes*, wrote that the "the decline of unionism in the US is not simply or even primarily due to changes in economic structure," but rather the subjective decision of American union leaders to adopt "business unionism." The "openings for welfare state reforms," he said, were much greater in Europe and Canada, where social democratic and Stalinist parties supposedly "helped to moderate the march of privatization, deregulation, and cutbacks in social service."

Where have all those who rejected the fight for socialism in the working class and chased after various bureaucratic "reformers" ended up? Inside the trade union bureaucracy as it tries to whip the working class into accepting the sacrifices needed for world war.

In the coming months there will be massive social opposition over the

consequences of the UAW contract. There have already been thousands of layoffs and conditions in the factories are increasingly deadly. On April 17, 43-year-old Tywaun Long died from a heart attack at the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant due to exhausting hours and speedup. Shortly before, he had gone to medical, but was denied assistance, according to his widow.

[On August 7, the day this report was delivered, 450 workers at Dakkota Integrated Systems walked out on strike in Chicago, beginning a sustained rebellion against the UAW bureaucracy. On the last day of the Congress, Stellantis announced it was laying off 2,450 workers at the metro Detroit Warren Truck Assembly Plant.]

These conditions will only worsen as the ruling class ratchets up the exploitation of workers to pay for America's massive debts and the cost of world war.

To the demands of the corporate-controlled parties for job cuts, austerity and war, the Socialist Equality Party election campaign will counterpose the demand that workers have the social right to a secure and good-paying job. New technologies like EVs, artificial intelligence and other forms of automation must be used to shorten working hours and drastically improve living standards, not throw workers out of their jobs and impoverish them. Rank-and-file committees must assert their control over production and safety.

But none of this can be achieved without the working class taking political power into its own hands, expropriating the wealth of the corporate-financial oligarchs and putting the auto industry under the collective ownership and democratic control of the working class, as part of the establishment of a planned, global socialist society.

The Lehman campaign showed what the party can do anywhere. The crisis will bring millions more workers into a fundamental conflict with the union bureaucracy, both capitalist parties and the profit system they defend. Through the SEP election campaign, the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and a determined political struggle to win workers to the party, we will be able to transform this emerging global movement of the working class into a politically conscious revolutionary movement for socialism.



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