

Pseudo-left outlet *Left Voice* covers for union bureaucrats' embrace of Trump

Tom Hall

24 February 2025

The Trump administration's bid for dictatorship has not only exposed the rot of US democracy. It also exposes the politics of pseudo-left groups who have functioned for decades as satellites of the Democratic Party and the union bureaucracy. Their role in US politics is to prevent an independent movement of the working class by promoting a dead-end perspective of "pressuring" the pro-capitalist Democratic Party and trade union apparatus.

A struggle against the Trump government in defense of democratic rights requires that workers shake off the straitjacket of the union bureaucracy. As the Socialist Equality Party declared in its New Year's statement, "Only to the extent that power is wrested from the hands of the bureaucracy and transferred to workers on the shop floor can the unions be revived as instruments of the class struggle."

This means forming rank-and-file committees to overthrow, not reform, the apparatus, and build a movement based on the international unity of the working class.

In opposition to this program, the Morenoite publication *Left Voice* recently published two articles on its website to provide a "left" cover for the bureaucracy and the Democratic Party.

The first, "Is the U.S. Labor Movement Ready for Trump 2.0?" proposes a fake "rank-and-file" movement under the control of the bureaucracy. Even the use of the phrase "labor movement," both in the headline and throughout the article, is aimed at erasing the class divisions between workers and the bureaucracy. "[W]e can't wait for *our leaders* to lead us [emphasis added]," *Left Voice* declares. "But we can build our power from the bottom up, organizing ourselves in our workplaces."

This is a re-hash of the sophist arguments used to justify support for Teamsters President Sean O'Brien and United Auto Workers leader Shawn Fain. These career officials, so the argument went, could be pressured, in spite of themselves, to lead a struggle. To help bolster such illusions and carry out the next round of sellouts, the bureaucracy brought into its leading circles members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Labor Notes and other pseudo-left forces who promoted this false and self-serving narrative.

The second article, "Weeks After Calling Trump a Scab, UAW President Is 'Ready to Work With Trump,'" is an open apology for Fain's embrace of Trump in a January 19 *Washington Post* op-ed column. In that piece, Fain declared that the UAW hoped "to find common ground on overhauling our devastating trade policies and rebuilding U.S. manufacturing" and declared "we need a strong system of tariffs that serve the national and working-class interest."

In a more recent statement, Fain declared the UAW was "willing to support the Trump administration's use of tariffs to stop plant closures and curb the power of corporations that pit US workers against workers in other countries," while claiming to oppose his "anti-worker policies at home" and attacks on immigrants.

With these statements, Fain is carrying out a political hoax by presenting tariffs as benefiting "American" workers. In reality, they are aimed at

strengthening American corporations against foreign rivals and dividing US workers from their brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada, China and elsewhere. The enormous costs of the tariffs, including in the form of higher prices, the breakdown of global supply chains and massive job cuts, are to be forced upon the backs of workers in the United States as well as abroad.

Drawing a false distinction between foreign and domestic policy, as well as between trade war and attacks on immigrants, Fain is attempting to disarm the working class in the face of a massive pro-corporate assault—and prevent its global unity.

Covering for Fain, *Left Voice* likewise talks out of both sides of their mouth. Even while purporting to criticize Fain's editorial, they call him "one of the most significant figures in the new progressive labor bureaucracy."

In attempting to reconcile how one can be both "progressive" and prepared to work with fascists, *Left Voice* is compelled to lie about his record. Fain led "autoworkers at the Big Three in a strike" which "made serious gains for workers," they claim. In fact, since the toothless standup strike in 2023, which impacted only a fraction of the auto industry and was coordinated with the Biden White House, thousands of autoworkers have lost their jobs, while the UAW has not lifted a finger to defend them.

Falsification of Marxism

Left Voice is also compelled to distort what the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote on the unions. It cites the following passage from Trotsky's unfinished 1940 manuscript, "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay," where he wrote that under monopoly capitalism,

trade unions in the most important branches of industry find themselves deprived of the possibility of profiting by the competition between the different enterprises. They have to confront a centralized capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power. Hence flows the need of the trade unions—insofar as they remain on reformist positions, i.e., on positions of adapting themselves to private property—to adapt themselves to the capitalist state and to contend for its cooperation.

Left Voice concludes:

In other words, the union bureaucracies play a dual role—they can mobilize workers to fight for their immediate economic interests,

but they will restrain those fights within the framework of capitalism, muzzling the potential of the self-organized rank-and-file to spark militant class struggle that could threaten capitalist stability. They “do their level best in words and deeds to demonstrate to the ‘democratic’ state how reliable and indispensable they are in peace-time and especially in time of war.”

We are seeing this play out with Fain before our very eyes.

This is a complete inversion of the meaning of what Trotsky wrote, trying to convert the great revolutionary Marxist, founder of the Fourth International and implacable opponent of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and all labor bureaucracies, into an unprincipled opportunist prepared to collaborate with anyone.

Significantly, they cut out the concluding sentence from the above paragraph, where Trotsky writes: “By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism.”

This is all the more significant given that Fain and company are not “demonstrating their reliability” to a bourgeois-democratic state, but to an incipient dictatorship.

The fact is that the union bureaucracy of today *does not* “mobilize workers to fight for their immediate interests.” They have worked for two generations to impose management’s dictates, block strikes and carry out massive layoffs and cuts to wages. The conditions in the auto plants today increasingly resemble those which existed before the United Auto Workers was founded.

While this was not yet the case in Trotsky’s day, it was anticipated by him when he observed: “The character of a workers’ organization such as a trade union is determined by its relation to the distribution of national income … should [the bureaucracy] defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed; then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union.”

But even 85 years ago, Trotsky stressed the basic inability of the bureaucracy to combine the defense of the immediate interests of the working class with support for imperialism. This is why, in *The Transitional Program*, Trotsky explained that it was the responsibility of socialists “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.”

This program would lead toward the creation of factory committees, which would begin a period of “dual power.” Trotsky continued: “By its very essence it represents the transitional state, because it includes in itself two irreconcilable regimes: the capitalist and the proletarian. The fundamental significance of factory committees is precisely contained in the fact that they open the doors, if not to a direct revolutionary, then to a pre-revolutionary period—between the bourgeois and the proletarian regimes.”

This conception, informed by the actual experience of the Russian Revolution, is the opposite of the limitless bureaucratic “dual role” which *Left Voice* impute to the bureaucracy. In fact, Trotsky warned: “Trade union bureaucrats will, as a general rule, resist the creation of factory committees, just as they resist every bold step along the road of mobilizing the masses.”

Left Voice ignores both the historic context of Trotsky’s article and the 85 years of history since. Even by the time Trotsky’s article was written, the new Congress of Industrial Organizations, which had organized a series of landmark strikes only a few years prior, had already reached a crisis owing to its orientation to the Democratic Party and the Roosevelt administration. (Trotsky: “Indicative and noteworthy in the highest degree, however, is the fact that the new ‘leftist’ trade union organization was no sooner founded than it fell into the steel embrace of the imperialist state.”)

With the United States’ entry into World War II, the CIO accommodated itself to American imperialism and helped enforce the infamous “no strike pledge.” In the aftermath of the war, leading CIO figures like Walter Reuther led the campaign to purge the ranks of the labor movement of the socialist militants who had built the industrial unions.

By 1955, the CIO merged with the conservative American Federation of Labor on the explicit basis of the defense of the domestic and international interests of American imperialism and the political subordination of the working class to the capitalist Democratic Party.

The full consequences of these policies could not be immediately apparent during the post-war boom, when US capitalism was prepared to exchange certain concessions in exchange for labor peace. Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, the unions were led by figures who had connections to the struggles of earlier generations, which gave them a cover for their opportunist adaptations.

But the end of the boom in the 1970s also brought the end of the policy of compromise, and the ruling class has spent five decades clawing back every concession it was ever forced to give up. At the same time, globalization objectively undermined the ability of the trade unions to appeal for concessions from the national state.

A turning point came in 1981, when the AFL-CIO sold out the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) by refusing to defend them after the Reagan administration fired them for striking. From that point on, the bureaucracy deepened its relations with management and the state and severed any connection it still retained to the class struggle.

Central to *Left Voice*’s claims about the “dual role” of the bureaucracy is that its social interests are bound up in some way with improvements to workers’ living standards. In fact, *the reverse* has been the case since the 1980s. Even as membership in unions have declined due to massive job cuts which the bureaucrats helped enforce through sellout contracts, the net assets of the unions, and with it the salaries of union officials, have ballooned to over \$35 billion.

For the bureaucracy, every strike not only threatens its lucrative relations with management through endless “joint” programs and outright bribes but, through strike pay and other expenses, represents a deduction from cash hoards from which they draw their salaries.

This transformation, prepared through decades of anticomunism and nationalism, is why, as the WSWS wrote last year when Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien began courting Trump, that “the union bureaucracy is a natural base of support for fascism.”

Left Voice’s distortion of Trotsky is not merely a theoretical error. It is determined by the interests of the upper-middle class layers which they represent, which also includes a substantial faction within the union bureaucracy. *Left Voice* is not fascist, but they are terrified of an independent movement from below against fascism because it threatens the bureaucracy’s ties to management and the state, which they defend and apologize for with phrases like “the dual role of the bureaucracy.” Such an upsurge from below would also cut off the gravy train to the pseudo-lefts who have gotten top positions in the union bureaucracy.

The transformation of the unions

Rank-and-file committees

In opposition to this, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International call for workers to build rank-and-file committees, not to reform the bureaucracy but to destroy it and transfer power from the apparatus to the workers on the shop floor. This is completely different from *Left Voice*'s call for "rank-and-file" organizations which include both workers and bureaucrats—which could serve only as a mechanism for the apparatus to spy on and victimize militant workers.

The program of rank-and-file committees, under new conditions, is fully in continuity with the perspective advocated by Trotsky. The power of such committees is that they are based, not on appeals to the capitalist state that they are "reliable and indispensable," but on establishing the independence of the working class from the capitalist political parties and the trade union bureaucracy and its unity across national boundaries.

While *Left Voice* promotes the myth that the bureaucracy can be revived and reformed, rank-and-file committees fight to clean out the bureaucracy and use the strike funds and other unions assets for the purpose of the class struggle, not for lining officials' pockets. They aim to break up all the labor-management committees in the factories, hospitals and other workplaces, and their replacement with rank-and-file committees, democratic organs of workers' power, which counterpose the will of the workers to the dictatorship of the management.

In the statement announcing the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in 2021, the ICFI declared: "New pathways for mass struggle must be created." Citing Trotsky's call to build independent organizations "corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society," the statement explained that rank-and-file committees would embrace both union and non-union workers, young workers and unemployed, and unite their struggles on a world scale. Since then, committees have played essential roles in mobilizing opposition to union sellouts and attacks on workers' rights by capitalist governments.

To fight Trump's attempts to establish a dictatorship, the SEP calls for the development of rank-and-file neighborhood and workplace committees. "Wherever they function," the SEP explained in a statement, "committees will strive to break down all efforts by the two big business parties and the trade union bureaucracies to divide workers along immigration status or national background."

The statement concludes: "The IWA-RFC will advocate for a program based on the class struggle, which throughout American history has proven necessary to bring together workers of all backgrounds to crush political backwardness and state repression. On this basis it will strive to transform the defense of immigrants into an offensive fight by the international working class against Trump and his source—the capitalist system."

This is what groups like *Left Voice* devote all of their efforts to preventing.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact