

United Auto Workers bureaucrats back Trump's trade war auto tariffs

Tom Hall
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What do you think about the UAW's endorsement of tariffs? Let us know by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The United Auto Workers has given its full-throated endorsement to Trump's announced tariffs on the global auto industry. The measures include a 25 percent tariff on all automobiles and certain auto parts produced outside of the United States.

A tariff is a tax on imports, paid by the company that imports them and passed on to households in the form of higher prices.

The UAW statement declares in its headline: "In a Victory for Autoworkers, Auto Tariffs Mark the Beginning of the End of NAFTA and the 'Free Trade' Disaster." The union bureaucracy claims that trade war will "bring back thousands of good-paying jobs."

The "America First" nationalist language with which the statement is written might as well have come from the Trump administration. In any case, it may very well have been produced in consultation with them.

The statement blames mass layoffs, which the UAW has actively participated in, on "recent decisions by auto executives to ship jobs to Mexico," trying to pit American workers against their brothers and sisters in Latin America—in many cases literally, given the huge immigrant numbers in the American working class.

It closes with a demand that Trump "immediately begin renegotiation of the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)," the successor to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), to force an "an increase in American-made parts for American-assembled and American-sold vehicles."

This amounts to endorsing Trump's attacks on Canada and Mexico, aimed at turning North America into a US-dominated fortress. Trump's aim is to reorganize supply chains in order to prepare for war against both official "enemies" like Russia and China and even so-called "allies." His threat to annex Greenland, a territory of NATO member Denmark, underscores this.

The practical impact of the tariffs will be the loss of tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of jobs on both sides of the US-Canadian and US-Mexican borders, as well as in Japan and Europe, a massive increase in prices for the US consumer and an increase in profits for US corporations.

Trump is putting into place these tariffs as part of a frontal assault on the jobs and living standards of the working class in the interests of the financial oligarchy. They are accompanied by the layoff of tens and hundreds of thousands of government workers and the destruction of the Medicare and Social Security social insurance programs workers have paid into their whole working lives, all enforced by the creation of a presidential dictatorship.

Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker who ran against Fain in the 2022 union election, declared:

Just a few months ago, Fain was shouting that Trump is a scab and doesn't give a damn about the working class. Now he wants workers to think all that has changed, and that Trump has been transformed into a champion of the working class.

He continued:

But it's not just cowardice motivating the UAW's statement. The UAW apparatus and other union bureaucracies have relentlessly promoted nationalism and protectionism for decades as a means to divide workers from their class brothers and sisters internationally and line them up behind their "American" corporate exploiters. This nationalist perspective has resulted in a disaster for workers: decades of plant closures and falling wages, all overseen and agreed to by Fain and his predecessors in control of the union apparatuses.

With this statement, the union bureaucracy makes clear that it is lining up with an out-and-out fascist-led government attempting to erect a dictatorship. The UAW's endorsement, with the union's false claim to speak in the name of 1.1 million members, grants legitimacy to Trump's attacks on immigrants and Latin American workers, although UAW President Shawn Fain has absurdly tried to verbally separate this from the issue of tariffs.

It also comes as the UAW has not lifted a finger to defend UAW members on the campuses, graduate students who are being targeted for abduction and deportation by Trump for taking part in anti-Gaza genocide protests. Yesterday, Marco Rubio boasted that more than 300 student visas had been revoked.

Workers reacted furiously to the UAW statement, making clear that the bureaucracy does not speak for them. "Should change it from the International Union to the 'scab' union," one worker quipped on Facebook. "Being proud of potentially taking food and income from your brothers and sisters to the north of you is quite honestly disgusting," another said. "We stood in solidarity with you through many years of hardships."

The UAW statement is part of a broader lineup of large sections of the bureaucracy behind Trump. This includes Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien, who has also explicitly backed mass deportations, as well as the declarations by the AFL-CIO of its willingness to "work with" Trump. The federal workers' unions are trying to block strike action and limit workers to writing their congressmen and filing grievances with federal labor agencies that are themselves on the chopping block.

The UAW tacks on a proviso at the end of its statement that workers "must be held harmless during any disruption that accompanies the reshoring process, with financial support from the federal government if necessary." Who do they think they're kidding? No such measures will come from Trump or any section of the ruling class, who are clawing back everything they ever had to give to workers in struggle.

As it always has, nationalism serves to deflect from the role of the union bureaucracy in "bargaining" away millions of jobs since the end of the 1970s. In 2023, the UAW used a limited strike to secure passage of a sellout contract now being used to conduct mass layoffs. The UAW lied to temporary workers, claiming they would be rolled over to full-time status, only for thousands of them to be immediately fired.

In the face of boiling anger, UAW President Shawn Fain launched an empty campaign last year blaming job losses at Stellantis, the French-Italian-American-owned company which is the successor to Chrysler, on "foreign" executives.

They held blameless Ford and General Motors, which are also carrying out mass layoffs, both in the US and in their global operations.

Claims that Mexico is to blame for job losses are empirically false. In fact, the global auto industry is cutting hundreds of thousands of jobs to impose the cost of lower than expected sales of electric vehicles, the economic impact of the war in Ukraine and other geopolitical crises onto the backs of the working class. The shift to EVs itself is bound up with plans to reduce labor by one-third.

These layoffs will get even worse under the blows of tariffs and trade wars.

Meanwhile, the unions in every country are responding by rallying around their "own" flag. The president of Unifor, the Canadian auto union, recently made a joint appearance with new prime minister and ex-central banker Mark Carney, declaring support for trade war against the US to save "Canadian" jobs. Unifor itself was created from a nationalist split in the UAW in the 1980s, when it was falsely claimed that a separate union in Canada would allow it to avoid American-style job losses.

The real task workers in the United States, Canada and Mexico face is not to rally around "their own" national section of capitalists but to unify with each other across borders for the *expropriation* of the auto industry and its transfer to public ownership under workers' control. This is necessary not only to save jobs but to eliminate the source of dictatorship and fascism in massive inequality and the rule of oligarchs like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos.

The fight against Trump requires the development of rank-and-file committees, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, organized to smash, not reform, the union apparatus, create new organs of struggle that put workers in control, and unite workers in every country in a common offensive against the ruling class.



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