

In Facebook livestream and Jacobin interview, UAW President Fain promotes economic nationalism and militarism

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United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain held a Facebook livestream event Thursday evening aimed at damage control over his embrace of Trump's trade war measures.

The tariffs, including 25 percent on "foreign" cars and auto parts, have produced mass layoffs in the auto industry, exposing Fain's lie that trade war would benefit the working class. This includes 900 layoffs of Stellantis workers in Michigan and Indiana as a consequence of the idling of plants in Mexico and Canada which they supply. Another 1,000 workers at Stellantis Warren Truck in suburban Detroit are to be laid off Monday for one month and another 200 workers are being laid off at General Motors Factory Zero in Detroit.

Fain's comments were a study in sophistry and evasion. Even as he defended Trump's trade war measures, he claimed to oppose the same administration's sweeping attacks on democratic rights, including the seizure and threatened deportation of pro-Palestinian activist and legal US resident Mahmoud Khalil, a former UAW member.

He declared, "We are not aligning everything we do with the Trump administration. We don't align with any politician or president. We are negotiating with the Trump administration."

He continued, "We have seen some reckless and chaotic activity on trade from this administration and there is a lot of fear and disruption." Brushing aside the mounting layoffs, he said, "We have to remember, is that disruption is not new to factory workers in this country. Disruption is what we have been living with for 30 years under a free trade disaster. It doesn't mean we support reckless random tariffs ... but it is a mistake to defend the status quo when it comes to free trade. ... Free trade has been the most harmful government policy of my entire life."

This statement reeks with hypocrisy. Over the past 50 years, hundreds of thousands of auto jobs were eliminated with the outright collaboration of the UAW.

It is not possible to meet in the middle with fascism. Fain and the UAW bureaucracy are lining up behind Trump's economic policies, the logic of which lead to world war. It can hardly be coincidental that the livestream opened with a segment hailing workers at General Dynamics in Groton, Connecticut, "the submarine capital of the world ... who design our military's most strategic assets."

To pay for these new wars requires the dismantling of all remaining social programs such as Medicare and Social Security and the impoverishment of the working class. As Fain well knows, this can only be enforced through means of massive repression, which Trump is actively carrying out.

While giving a full-throated defense of economic nationalism, Fain

gave only lip service to opposing the fascistic, blatantly unconstitutional attacks being carried out by the Trump administration aimed at immigrants and college students. He presented the deportations as though they were merely mistaken policies and not part of a systematic effort to establish a presidential dictatorship. Fain proposed no measures to mobilize the UAW rank-and-file or the working class more broadly to defend Khalil and other workers and students whisked off to detention centers.

Workers reacted furiously in the comments of the livestream. "Can we talk about Warren Truck and Stellantis? Getting all of us indefinitely laid off people back to work?" another worker posted.

Many expressed support for international unity. "Corporations went overseas because they wanted cheap labor because they are greedy. The only solution is to defend workers worldwide. To decent living standards. So tired of 'us against them.' It will always be our downfall," another posted.

One worker wrote, referencing Trump's fascist attacks, "Sean Fain be prepared to shut all of the auto plants down for our democracy." Many others called for a general strike.

A worker from Kokomo pointed to the 500 workers still laid off from 2024.

"You and the international wouldn't back us back when we could and should have [struck]. Now we sit back without a pension for new hires among other things."

The livestream was preceded by a fawning interview conducted by *Jacobin* magazine, the house organ of the Democratic Socialists of America, in its April 10 edition. In it, Fain once again made clear his alignment with the plans for global war by the Trump administration, warning that the erosion of the US industrial base undermined its military preparedness.

"[W]hen we eliminate our manufacturing base in this country, we're going to be in big trouble if we have to defend ourselves. Because when you can't produce anything, you're opening yourself up for attack from anyone. I go back to the arsenal of democracy in World War II: the way that World War II was won when the United States got involved was, we utilized the excess capacity at our auto plants in this country to build bombers, to build tanks, to build jeeps."

In plain language, the UAW bureaucracy promotes not only trade war, but world war as a supposed boon to American jobs. In fact, the war economy during World War II was accompanied by massive repression, including the internment of Japanese Americans, the arrests of socialist opponents of US imperialism and a "no strike" pledge that the unions dutifully enforced.

A mobilization for war today, under conditions where US capitalism is in deep decline and its democratic institutions fatally compromised, would have far more in common with the Nazi war economy. But even leaving this aside, a world war, unless stopped by the working class, would inevitably lead to the annihilation of everyone on the planet.

This is not something which Fain and the UAW bureaucracy introduced in the last few months to win the favor of Trump. Fain promoted the same line about the “arsenal of Democracy” under Biden, who called the unions his “domestic NATO.” This meant the use of the bureaucracy, which has a long history of support for US imperialism, to prepare American society for war, especially through imposing “labor peace” on the working class.

That *Jacobin* opened up its pages to Fain to defend his support for the fascist Trump and for war exposes the DSA’s political function for capitalism, which is to divert and disrupt the emergence of a genuine movement in the working class.

Economic nationalism and globalization

In the attempt to justify the UAW’s program of economic nationalism, Fain advanced the narrative that the destruction of auto industry jobs began 30 years ago with the beginning of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

This is a blatant lie which cuts out of the record the UAW’s role in imposing layoffs since the late 1970s. A major turning point came in 1979, when then-UAW President Doug Fraser joined Chrysler’s board of directors, helping the company shutter dozens of plants and destroy tens of thousands of jobs.

This was part of a broader class war policy. The loss of the unchallenged economic supremacy of the United States, which had provided the basis for a policy of limited social reform expressed in the New Deal and Great Society, forced the American ruling class to claw back everything it had ever given up.

The assault on jobs escalated in the late 1970s under the Carter administration, which installed Paul Volcker as head of the US Federal Reserve to enact a tight money policy aimed at wiping out vast sections of less profitable industry in the US in order to undermine the militancy of the American working class and drive down wages and living conditions.

At the same time, major advances in technology associated with computerization led to revolutionary changes in the form of capitalist production, including the rise of the transnational corporation and globalization.

Globalization is not simply the movement of jobs overseas, but a higher integration of the world economy through the establishment of global production and supply chains and the emergence of a world labor market. Under capitalism, it was used to impose declining conditions on the working class, especially in the advanced countries.

But the same process has produced a far larger, more powerful and objectively unified working class than at any point in world history, creating hundreds of millions of new workers across Asia, Africa and Latin America and creating the conditions for a truly international movement against capitalist exploitation.

But the bureaucracy, dominated by nationalism and bound together with the capitalist state, had no answer to this. In the wake of

Reagan’s 1981 destruction of the air traffic controllers union, the assault on the working class escalated.

In 1984 the UAW openly embraced the program of corporatism, that is, unbridled union-management collaboration aimed at destroying wages and working conditions in order to boost the competitive position of the US auto bosses against their overseas capitalist rivals.

This involved the isolation and crushing of strikes, the suppression of opposition to factory closures and mass layoffs and the formation of union management committees to impose speedups and suppress shop floor militancy. As the membership of the UAW plummeted, the union apparatus received new forms of income in the form of direct subsidies from management for so-called joint programs.

The turn to corporatism was accompanied by an explosion of nationalist, anti-foreigner demagoguery on the part of the UAW leadership, blaming workers in Mexico, Japan etc. for “stealing” American jobs. This led in 1985 to the split with the Canadian region of the UAW, which formed a rival, nationally-based union. Today, the Canadian auto union Unifor is responding to Trump’s tariffs by supporting protectionism in Canada.

Rank-and-file committees

In opposition to the nationalist and pro-capitalist UAW apparatus, Will Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks workers and socialist, ran for UAW president in 2022. Lehman called for the unity of American workers with their brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada, China, the European countries and others in a common fight to defend the social right to a secure and good-paying job, and safe working conditions for all workers.

Lehman called for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and the transfer of power to the shopfloor workers through the expansion of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committees Network. He opposed both big business parties and called for the development of a politically independent movement of the working class to fight for a workers’ government and socialism.

A genuine fight for jobs cannot be based on pragmatic alignments with one gang or another of big business politicians as claimed by Fain, but only through the independent industrial and political mobilization of the power of the US and international working class against the whole capitalist setup.

Under conditions of transnational production, with corporations able to shift production rapidly from country to country, the only viable strategy is a program based on uniting the working class globally.

This means the building and expansion of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is giving independent voice to workers in opposition to the pro-corporate and nationalist trade union bureaucracies.



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