Reply to a laid-off Stellantis worker on UAW support for Trump’s tariffs

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has encountered many workers who are confused by the promotion of economic nationalism by UAW President Shawn Fain, who claims that the tariffs on imported autos and auto parts imposed by President Trump will benefit American autoworkers.

One worker on layoff from the Stellantis Jeep assembly plant in Toledo recently wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site*. We post below the letter and the reply by the WSWS.

> I am on indefinite layoff, not because of the tariff but due to mismanagement! Stellantis was the problem and their management long before the tariff. Companies took advantage of the free trade and it needed to be corrected/fixed long ago! My opinion is do it now so the US has a brighter future in manufacturing later! It will strengthen out sooner or later!
>
> On the record; I don’t like Trump and didn’t vote for him but I do believe in the tariff to be corrected! - TB

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Dear TB,

Thank you for your comment to the *World Socialist Web Site*. You raise important questions relating to tariffs and the strategy needed to oppose the layoffs that are taking a devastating human toll on the lives of workers.

In numerous statements, UAW President Shawn Fain has claimed that President Trump has “made history” by imposing tariffs on auto imports that will “create thousands more jobs.” Fain claims that the onslaught on auto jobs began in 1994 with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Let’s examine these arguments.

While the UAW tells workers to “Buy American,” the truth is there is no such thing as an “American” car. All vehicles made today are the product of the collective labor of workers in many different countries.

Take the Jeep Gladiator, built in Toledo. While final assembly takes place in Ohio, components come from all over the world. For example, engine and transmission parts are produced at the Etobicoke Casting Plant in Toronto. The eight-speed automatic transmission (ZF 8HP) is designed by ZF Friedrichshafen AG in Germany and assembled in Mexico. Other engine components and stamping parts are produced at the Saltillo Engine Plant in Mexico. Many of the electronic parts come from Asia, including Japan, China and South Korea.

This worldwide division of labor has created a highly integrated global working class. To fight transnational corporations, the working class must adopt an international strategy, uniting workers across borders in a common fight against the employers. This requires a fight against all forms of nationalism, which lines up workers behind their “own” gang of corporate owners against workers in other countries.

The only progressive solution to the conflict between the global economy and the nation state system is for the working class to become masters of the banks and giant corporations and organize production on a rational, planned and international basis to meet human needs, not private profit. This means a fight against the pro-corporate and nationalist trade union bureaucracies and the building of democratic rank-and-file committees in the plants and work places as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

These committees will overthrow the bureaucrats and bring the power onto the shop floor to determine the best fighting policy for the workers. They will enable the workers all across the country and internationally to exchange information, network and coordinate their struggles against the internationally organized auto companies and banks.

Fain parrots Trump’s claims that massive tariffs will not cut US exports, severely disrupt supply chains and lead to new waves of layoffs of autoworkers in the US. You are no doubt aware that Stellantis has already announced 900 US layoffs as part of thousands of new job cuts in North America, in the wake of Trump’s tariff war announcements.

Supposedly, the tariffs will force the auto bosses to “reshore” production in the US, leading to an increase in good-paying and secure US auto jobs. In fact, as many economists admit, the trade war will sharply reduce markets in a downward spiral toward recession and even depression. Moreover, to the extent that the auto bosses open up new plants in the US, they will be highly automated, and the relatively few jobs they create will be even more intensely exploitative that those that presently exist.

As long as ownership of the plants remains in the hands of the capitalist bosses, the impact of “reshoring” will be turned against the workers and used to increase profit margins.

What are the broader implications of the trade war policy enacted by Trump and promoted by Fain? Trump has made clear that “national security” is at the center of his tariff policy. Driving the tariffs is Trump’s “America First” policy, aimed at creating a “Fortress America” to take on its economic rivals, in the first place, China. This is behind his calls to seize Greenland, the Panama Canal and even make Canada the 51st state. He has also threatened military

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intervention in Mexico. The scale of Trump's tariffs, imposed on supposed friend and foe alike, is tantamount to an act of war.

The promotion of economic nationalism by the United Auto Workers has always been bound up with support for US militarism. Fain often boasts of the World War II role of the UAW as part of the "Arsenal of Democracy" and has posed for photos wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with a B-24 bomber. For its part, the White House has reposted Fain's statements in support of tariffs. It is for good reason that Joe Biden praised the AFL-CIO and UAW bureaucracies as his "domestic NATO."

Support for tariffs and protectionism by the UAW is aimed both at diverting the anger of workers over job cuts toward workers in other countries and covering up the real source of the attacks on jobs and living standards, the capitalist profit system, which the UAW defends.

Fain and the UAW bureaucrats are well aware that trade war will further reduce their dues base and threaten the cash hoard they use to finance their six-figure salaries and padded expense accounts. So they are seeking to convince the ruling elite, including the military, of their utility in suppressing the resistance of workers and policing them in order to carry out a military conflict with China or other rivals to US capitalist global hegemony. A central aspect of the World War II "Arsenal of Democracy" that Fain neglects to mention is the war-time no-strike policy that the union leaders imposed on the rank and file.

Paying 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. One of the lies promoted by Trump is that tariffs are paid by foreign countries. In fact, tariffs are an indirect tax on consumers, paid by workers and their families through higher costs on goods.

Trump's attacks on democratic rights, mass deportations and the crackdown on free speech in violation of the First Amendment are aimed at enforcing this fascistic agenda, which lacks popular support. These same illegal methods will be used to suppress strikes and other forms of protest.

Economists have long understood that a major factor in the depth and persistence of the Great Depression was the passage of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act in 1930, which precipitated a collapse in global trade. Policies of national autarchy, or self-sufficiency, were bound up with a massive growth in militarism, sowing the seeds for WWII. As in the 1930s, the logic of economic war leads to world war.

Why this seemingly mad drive toward a potentially civilization-ending world war on the part of the Trump administration? The rise of Trump is the product of a profound crisis of US capitalism.

Trump's tariffs are shattering the last remnants of the economic arrangements that were set up following WWII aimed at preventing a repeat of the disastrous trade wars of the 1930s. Central to the arrangements set up at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire in 1944 was the central role of the US dollar as the world reserve currency. This was based on the then-unchallenged industrial supremacy of the United States, reflected in its vast gold reserves.

Over the last 80 years, that economic domination has deteriorated, calling into question the central role of the US dollar in global finance. In fact, following repeated multi-trillion-dollar bailouts of Wall Street and the banks, the US is essentially bankrupt, sitting on $36 trillion in debt and running a $1 trillion annual trade deficit.

Increasingly, the American capitalist class has made its vast profits not from the production of useful goods, but from financial speculation and manipulation. This process of parasitic financialization has culminated in Trump's government of, by and for the billionaire oligarchy, and its promotion of semi-criminal forms of speculation such as crypto-currencies.

This is what Fain is backing with his promotion of Trump's tariffs.

Fain's claim that the decimation of auto jobs and US manufacturing began in 1994 with NAFTA is a lie. In fact, an assault on the jobs and living standards of autoworkers has been underway at least since the late 1970s. One only has to recall the closure of Chrysler Dodge Main in Detroit, GM Fleetwood, Cadillac and scores of other factories.

The deindustrialization of vast areas of the US Midwest during the 1980s was a deliberate policy pursued by Corporate America with the full support of both the Democratic and Republican parties. This was aimed at weakening the working class and lowering its living standards. The result was a vast enrichment of Wall Street bankers and financiers and a massive growth of social inequality.

At the same time, advances in technology accelerated the process of global economic integration and the rise of transnational corporations. These changes, which had the potential to improve the lives of workers, were used instead to drive down living standards by pitting workers in the US against workers in lower-wage areas.

All of this began long before NAFTA. The enactment of NAFTA was part of the effort by the United States to establish a North American trading bloc targeting its chief economic rivals. At the same time, NAFTA was used to intensify the exploitation of workers in the US as well as in Canada and Mexico.

But instead of fighting for a strategy to unify workers across borders, the UAW advanced a nationalist strategy aimed at bolstering US automakers by cutting wages and boosting productivity in order to supposedly "save" jobs. At the same time, the UAW blamed foreign workers for "stealing" American jobs.

Politics has a logic. While Shawn Fain claims that he opposes Trump's attacks on immigrants and student activists, the fact that he is supporting Trump's economic nationalist agenda means the UAW is lined up behind a fascistic administration that is preparing for global war.

The WSWS calls on the working class to take industrial and political action in defense of its interests independent of the two corporate-controlled political parties.

A real fight to defend jobs must be based on a global strategy, uniting workers in the US with our working class brothers in Canada, Mexico and beyond. This requires the building of rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor. We call for the development of a politically independent movement of the working class to fight for a workers' government and socialism.

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