

The Nation, pseudo-left back UAW President Fain's embrace of Trump tariffs

Tom Hall
25 April 2025

In recent weeks, pseudo-left and “progressive” outlets have circled the wagons around United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain. They are defending him from growing working class outrage over his embrace of Trump’s tariffs and “America First” policies.

This is part of a broader support by the union bureaucracy for tariffs. Broad sections of the apparatus, including both the ILWU and ILA dockworker unions and the Teamsters, have lined up in support of trade war.

In backing tariffs, the union bureaucracy is supporting a fascistic administration which is using tariffs to prepare supply chains for world war, especially against China. They are promoting a policy which recalls the darkest period of the 20th century under the Nazis, where trade war preceded the outbreak of World War II in September 1939.

This has rightly evoked disgust by workers and the millions who have taken to the streets against Trump. In damage-control mode, *Jacobin*, the de-facto house organ of the Democratic Socialists of America, has opened up its pages to Fain for him to justify collaboration with the would-be dictator.

The Nation, whose president is former *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara, published a statement last week titled: “Shawn Fain for President!” The editors at the “progressive” magazine, which Leon Trotsky once described as a “reptile breed” for their lies in support of the Moscow Trials under Stalin, are now employing lies in defense of the union apparatus’ support for fascism.

Author Jeet Heer claims that “centrist Democrats hate the union leader because he puts the working class first.” He goes on: “Fain’s harshest critics have come from the ranks of pundits from publications such as Vox and allied think tanks...”

This is totally false. Opposition to Fain is not centered in the Democratic Party, but from workers, young people, and all those opposed to the growing threat of fascism in the US. Workers know that trade war will bring layoffs and plant closures and want unity with their co-workers in other countries.

As for the claim that Fain “puts workers first,” his main “achievement” is a national auto contract, passed through lies after a toothless limited strike, which has cost thousands of auto workers their jobs.

The claim that “centrist Democrats” oppose Fain is also false and hypocritical, given that both *The Nation* and Fain were supporters of the Biden administration.

Fain’s support for tariffs under Trump is a continuation of his policies under Biden, where he continuously pledged to offer up autoworkers for a war economy. In a recent interview with *Jacobin*, Fain called tariffs a “national security issue,” adding, “when we eliminate our manufacturing base in this country, we’re going to be in big trouble if we have to defend ourselves... 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.”

According to *The Nation*’s false narrative, tariffs benefit and are supported by workers, while “free trade” and globalization are supported by the elite and Wall Street. In fact, Trump’s tariffs are aimed at defending the interests of US capitalism.

And the bureaucracy backs trade war not out of concern for “American” workers but its own social interests, which are dependent upon ties with corporate boardrooms and the government.

The choice facing workers is not between globalized capitalist exploitation and a return to “national” exploitation. The very emergence of a unified global economy, while used by the capitalists to drive down wages, makes possible and necessary a powerful, internationally unified, and socialist movement in the working class against capitalism.

Globalization brought an end to the period in which the union bureaucracy could combine nationalism with a limited defense of workers’ economic interests. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, nationalism acted as the justification for the unions’ assistance in destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs in the name of American “competitiveness.” While collaborating with management at “native” car companies, the bureaucracy incited racism against the Japanese, which culminated in the murder of Vincent Chin.

Today in China, autoworkers are carrying out strikes against electric vehicle maker BYD. Rather than uniting with their natural allies in the US auto industry in a common struggle, Fain and the bureaucracy pit them against each other by claiming “American” jobs can be saved by destroying jobs and

industry in other countries. In reality, they are assisting in a policy whose essence is class war against workers across the whole planet, in both the US and abroad.

Because *The Nation*, the DSA, Labor Notes, and others continue to uphold the national arena as the only viable and legitimate one for the working class, they are now compelled to back Trump's "defense" of the nation against foreign adversaries.

The pseudo-left's arguments in defense of the UAW mirror fascist rhetoric from figures like top Trump advisor Steve Bannon, who denounce "globalists" while falsely identifying the interests of the working class with nationalism. *The Nation* is not fascist, but its politics bring it into alignment with extreme-right forces.

This has deep roots. Already by the 1990s, the bureaucrats were lining up with Ross Perot, a billionaire militarist and supporter of austerity who ran for president in 1992 and 1996, and Hitler admirer Pat Buchanan.

The pseudo-left, who have backed wars from Bosnia in the 1990s to Libya and Syria in 2011 and the proxy war in Ukraine today, underwent a similar transformation. Rejecting the central revolutionary role played by the working class, they proposed instead a non-class "populist" opposition which explicitly includes the extreme right.

This includes support for neo-Nazi militias like the Azov Battalion and the Right Sector in Ukraine, the forming of a coalition government by the Greek pseudo-left SYRIZA with the right-wing Independent Greeks, and countless others. In Germany, the Green Party distinguishes itself as the most strident militarists in parliament.

The Nation squirms as best it can to hide this. Quoting a list of verbal criticisms by Fain of Trump's "domestic" policies, which the UAW has done nothing about and which is meant only to give the bureaucracy cover, *The Nation* tries to claim it is possible to separate tariffs from other aspects of Trump's policies.

But however much it may try to deny it, if one accepts a fascist economic policy one is compelled to accept fascist policies on immigration, free speech, and everything else.

It then raises the objection that Fain and the UAW "[are] not supporting the Trump administration but rather negotiating with it, the same way the union negotiates with corporations." This is like claiming that Doctor Faust was "only negotiating" a deal with the devil, or that one could "bargain" with Hitler without acting as his enabler. It is clear who really benefits from this.

At any rate, for decades the union bureaucracy has not engaged in "negotiations" with corporations either, but conspired with them against workers, just as they are doing now with Trump.

The promotion, through Fain, of Trump vindicates the decision by socialist autoworker Will Lehman to run in the 2022 UAW election. Emphasizing the need to smash, not reform the bureaucracy, Lehman ran on a campaign of

transferring power to workers through the establishment of rank-and-file committees.

Those defending Fain's support for Trump bitterly opposed Lehman's campaign, and many have since been rewarded with six-figure posts in the UAW bureaucracy. But while there are mercenary personal interests at stake, the unanimous support from these quarters for Fain can only be explained by deeper causes.

The truth is they have been profoundly shaken by the massive response to the anti-Trump protests this month, where attendees seethed with hatred not only of Trump but the Democrats and the entire system. Their worst fear is that this opposition will inevitably bring forth a working class movement against capitalism itself. If they have any hope of preventing this, they need the services and continued credibility of the bureaucracy.

The working class must draw its own lessons. Not for nothing did Marx, even 180 years ago, raise the slogan "Workers of the world, Unite!" This meant that the interests of the working class, in contrast to the capitalists, were not tied to the national soil, and that the logic of its struggle against capitalist exploitation would lead to its overthrow, the end of all forms of exploitation, and the establishment of a global socialist commonwealth.

In other words, the basic task facing the working class is not the utopia of winding back globalization and reviving the national economy, a policy which leads inevitably to economic crisis and war, but to take control over the world economy created by capitalism and run it in the interests of society, not private profit.

On May 3, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees (IWA-RFC) will hold the annual May Day online rally. This event aims to unify workers and young people around the world in the struggle for socialism, opposing all national and ethnic divisions. We urge everyone seeking to defend the social, economic, and political rights of the working class to attend this critical event.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact