

Unite All Workers for Democracy, faction of UAW apparatus, dissolves itself: The lessons for the working class

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The Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) voted on April 27 to dissolve itself. Founded in 2019 by members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), *Labor Notes*, and other “union reform” advocates, UAWD played a central role in installing Shawn Fain as president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and in providing a left cover for the union apparatus of which the UAWD is a part.

The dissolution of UAWD is further proof that the anti-working-class actions of the UAW bureaucracy are not the result of merely “bad” policies, but express the social interests of the apparatus itself. It also confirms the program advanced by socialist autoworker Will Lehman, who ran against Shawn Fain in the 2022 union election on a platform to abolish—not reform—the bureaucracy and transfer power to workers through rank-and-file committees.

The immediate context for UAWD’s dissolution is the UAW bureaucracy’s open embrace of the fascistic Trump administration. The UAW is among several major unions falsely promoting Trump’s tariffs as a boon for workers—even as they trigger mass layoffs across North America and the globally integrated auto industry. The logic of these trade war policies is the preparation for war against China and other rivals of US imperialism, accompanied by a domestic offensive against workers through mass unemployment and rising prices.

Fain was already widely despised among autoworkers for his role in facilitating thousands of job cuts in the auto industry. UAWD, already complicit in these layoffs, is now further discredited by its association with the union’s collaboration with a would-be fascist dictator and its support for policies that pave the way for world war.

This has led to a predictable collapse in support for the UAWD, with the group’s dissolution following months of declining recruitment, mounting resignations and growing disaffection.

A resolution proposed in March stated: “Internal strife has significantly hampered recruitment ... Members have disengaged ... citing a toxic culture and lack of focus on the issues they care about most.” The resolution added that UAWD’s members “can no longer work together toward common goals,” pointing to irreconcilable divisions over the organization’s direction.

At the April 27 online meeting, members voted 160–137 to dissolve UAWD. Within hours, nearly all statements the group had issued over the past six years were scrubbed from the internet.

The vote provoked bitter recriminations, with the minority accusing the majority of using undemocratic methods to force through the decision. The push for liquidation was led by Scott Houldieson, a former vice president of UAW Local 551 and longtime figure in the DSA, *Labor Notes* and other pseudo-left circles. A founding member of UAWD, Houldieson played a central role in backing career bureaucrat Fain as the group’s presidential candidate in 2022.

Opposing the shutdown were UAWD members from academic and legal aid locals—such as Ye-Eun Jong (Columbia), Andrew Bergman and Toly Rinberg (both from Harvard)—as well as veteran members like Judy Wraight, a retired Ford Rouge worker aligned with *Against the Current*.

This so-called “class struggle wing” provided the UAW bureaucracy with an anti-war and anti-genocide façade, even as Fain campaigned for Biden and Harris and allowed UAW members protesting the Gaza genocide to be dragged out of rallies. Their position became increasingly untenable as Fain embraced Trump’s “America First” nationalism and abandoned persecuted students like former UAW member Mahmoud Khalil.

None of the factions can provide an honest accounting of the real source of the crisis within the organization. Instead, they resort to bitter infighting, trading accusations of a personal and organizational, rather than a principled, character.

UAWD’s history and function

UAWD was founded in 2019 with the backing of the pseudo-left publication *Labor Notes* as a maneuver to contain growing rank-and-file opposition. Its purpose was to divert this unrest away from developing into an independent movement that could challenge not only the union bureaucracy but the capitalist profit system.

It was formed amid a major corruption scandal that led to the jailing of more than a dozen UAW officials, including two former presidents. With the support of the court-appointed UAW Monitor, the political establishment backed UAWD as a means to install Fain in a union election rigged against the rank and file.

UAWD played a key role in the new administration. At last year’s *Labor Notes* conference, following a speech promoting a war economy, Shawn Fain held up his personal, marked-up copy of *Labor Notes’ Troublemakers Handbook*, which he described as his “bible.”

They have been, and remain, well compensated for their roles as top advisers in the union bureaucracy. Fain’s chief of staff, Chris Brooks—a DSA member and former *Labor Notes* writer—took home \$211,968 in 2024. His assistant, Jonah Furman, also a *Labor Notes* alum and organizer for Bernie Sanders’ 2020 primary campaign, made \$175,318. Both have issued statements defending the UAW’s embrace of Trump’s nationalist trade war policies.

During the 2023 contract struggle, UAWD promoted the phony “Stand Up” strike—which kept the vast majority of workers on the job—as a brilliant tactical innovation. It glorified Fain’s photo op with Biden and

helped spread the fraud that the sellout contracts were “historic victories.”

In reality, the contract was rammed through with lies. Within weeks of its passage, thousands of layoffs began—starting with temporary workers who had been falsely promised full-time jobs. Throughout this, Fain and UAWD maintained a guilty silence, broken only by a brief nationalist media campaign blaming job cuts at Stellantis on “foreign” executives.

Now, the minority admits that dissatisfaction is growing “as the shortcomings and loopholes in the Big 3 contracts, which were billed as historic in 2023, have become clearer.” But it was they themselves who hailed these sellout agreements as “historic.”

In an article on the collapse of UAWD, *Labor Notes* wrote with barely disguised contempt for workers, that a re-emerging “pessimism about their union” was the cause of the group’s declining fortunes. In reality, what they dismiss as cynicism is in fact a growing and justified hatred of the bureaucracy—a mood of opposition that is looking for a way to fight back.

Nationalism and the bankruptcy of “reform”

The so-called “class struggle” faction warns that Fain’s outreach to the old Administrative Caucus and his flirtations with Trump will damage his credibility. But their concern is not to oppose the bureaucracy—it is to preserve it. They argue that UAWD’s “class struggle unionism” rhetoric remains necessary as political cover, a means to prevent the growing opposition of workers from developing into a real break with the union apparatus.

The minority now claims that Fain’s embrace of Trump’s tariffs is a response to a broader “right-wing turn in the country,” writing: “Unfortunately, our UAW leadership is also feeling this pressure, as shown by their recent support of Trump’s sweeping, protectionist tariffs, which will ultimately harm Mexican, Canadian, and US workers and create painful inflationary pressure.”

Wright adds in *Against the Current*: “The UAW should reverse its support for Trump’s tariffs and stand on international solidarity...”

This is the height of cynicism, given UAWD’s direct role in promoting—and in some cases helping to craft—these very policies. Fain and the bureaucrats are not merely “feeling the pressure” of the right; their embrace of Trump reflects the bureaucracy’s deep-rooted hostility to the working class, its entrenched anticommunism, its “America First” nationalism and its identification with the interests of American imperialism.

UAWD is just one of countless organizations—such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), Autoworker Caravan, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) and others—that have emerged over the past 45 years claiming it is possible to “reform” the unions while preserving the bureaucracy and rejecting a fight for socialism.

Under conditions of globalization and the deepening crisis of American capitalism, it proved impossible to reconcile this orientation with even the most minimal defense of workers’ interests. Wherever these forces gained positions within the union bureaucracy, they became instruments for enforcing new and even deeper betrayals.

In the Teamsters, the sister organization of UAWD, the TDU played a central role in the election of “reform” General President Sean O’Brien. Now, the O’Brien-led bureaucracy is helping to implement the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs at UPS. O’Brien has aligned himself even more openly with Trump than Fain, and TDU is quietly maneuvering to join his slate in next year’s union election.

UAWD and Will Lehman: Then and now

In March 2023, UAWD declared triumphantly that with the elevation of Fain, “A new day is dawning for our union. Shawn will be the next President of the UAW, and reformers will gain majority control...”

A recent *Tempest* interview on the internal dispute within UAWD featured minority faction leaders echoing the same narrative, declaring: “Both sides acknowledge that Fain is the best president the UAW has had in decades...”

UAWD opposed the campaign of Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, who ran on a program to abolish the bureaucracy and transfer power to the shop floor. They dismissed his demands as “unrealistic,” promoting Fain as the “practical” alternative.

When Lehman exposed systemic voter suppression and sought to extend the voting period, UAWD sided with the bureaucracy in opposing the lawsuit. They defended an election in which Fain won with the votes of less than 5 percent of the eligible membership, dismissing the mass disenfranchisement of workers as mere “apathy.” In doing so, they helped legitimize a fraudulent process designed to keep power in the hands of the apparatus.

Lehman countered: “Fain’s opposition to giving rank-and-file workers a meaningful right to vote shows his faction is no different from [former president Ray] Curry’s.”

It has taken just over two years since its greatest apparent “success” for UAWD to disintegrate. This collapse is an indirect but telling expression of the irreconcilable conflict between the union bureaucracy and the rank and file—a conflict that cannot be resolved with empty slogans about “bottom-up organizing” or “democratic unionism.”

UAWD was built to block rebellion. Now it has collapsed in on itself. Its remnants will try to form new traps, but its breakup also shows that the conditions are increasingly favorable for building a real alternative: rank-and-file committees to abolish the bureaucracy and transfer power to the shop floor—that is, the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File-Committees.

The IWA-RFC is the essential mechanism for uniting the working class across all national, racial, and industrial divisions. It provides the organizational framework for workers to oppose the nationalism and chauvinism promoted by the ruling elites in every country. The IWA-RFC fights to link the struggles of workers internationally, to oppose fascism, dictatorship and imperialist war.

The rebellion against the union apparatus will form a central part of the emergence of an independent movement of the working class. Colossal social struggles are on the horizon, which will pit workers against the would-be Führer Trump, his Democratic Party enablers, and the entire capitalist state. The rise of Trump—and his embrace by the pro-capitalist union bureaucrats—is itself a product of the deep crisis of the capitalist system. That same crisis will give rise to revolutionary upheavals in the US and internationally.

Workers must draw the essential lessons from the collapse of UAWD. The task is not the futile “reform” of a pro-capitalist apparatus, but the development of their own political independence and organization. What is required is the fight for a socialist program that unites workers in the US and internationally in a common struggle against the capitalist system and all its agents.



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