

After mass anti-Trump protests, UAW President Fain doubles down on support for trade war

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On Monday, United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain issued a statement doubling down on his support for Trump's tariffs, denouncing "free trade" and echoing the far-right economic nationalism of the fascist president. The video, posted to X/Twitter, blames job losses in America on Mexican autoworkers, endorsing what is in reality an economic war against workers both "foreign" and "native."

The union released this statement just two days after what may have been the largest protests in American history. Between 5 and 11 million people took part in demonstrations across the United States last weekend against the dictatorial measures by the Trump administration. These protests erupted following Trump's order to deploy the military in Los Angeles, where troops were used to violently suppress demonstrations in defense of immigrant workers.

The UAW and other major unions effectively boycotted the protests. The UAW apparatus made no effort to mobilize its membership, including more than a million active and retired autoworkers. Not even in Detroit, where tens of thousands of auto and parts workers live, did the UAW make an appearance. The bureaucrats are terrified of this growing social opposition, which threatens not just their political alliances but the entire framework of labor-management collaboration upon which their privileges depend.

Fain's video is, for all intents and purposes, the response of the bureaucracy to the mass protests. In the emerging showdown between the working class and Trump, the bureaucracy is lining up against workers on the other side of the barricade.

Fain's statement also followed a particularly unhinged social media post by Trump on Sunday, in which he called for the biggest immigration raids in history, incited his right-wing base to violence and implicitly denounced protesters as not "real Americans." Fain and the UAW bureaucracy have not responded to this, nor to the deployment of tanks in American cities, the mass raids, or the military parade organized in Trump's honor. Nor have they said anything about the Israeli war with Iran, which Trump supports and is on the verge of openly joining.

Instead, Fain chose to reiterate his support for trade war in Monday's video. "The free trade disaster has to come to an end," Fain declared. He blamed workers in Mexico for the closure of American factories, describing a world where companies "force workers across borders to compete with one another" and "ship products back in at massive profit—profits pocketed by executives and shareholders, who also pay off politicians for good measure."

Fain's depiction of the world economy is taken directly from the playbook of Trump and the far right. The central premise is that the problem lies not with capitalism but with the "disloyal" behavior of corporate executives and foreign governments undermining American industry. This is the classic appeal of economic nationalism: the false identification of the interests of workers with the interests of the capitalist nation-state, and the presentation of reactionary, pro-business policies—like tariffs—as if they were in the interests of the working class.

"Meanwhile, we get Flint, we get Lordstown, we get Belvidere—communities that look like a bomb dropped," Fain continued. The hypocrisy is staggering. The UAW has played a central role in destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs since the late 1970s. In the name of boosting the "competitiveness" of the US auto industry against its Asian and European rivals, the UAW bureaucracy abandoned strikes, imposed savage wage and benefit cuts and sanctioned the shutdown of hundreds of factories. Between 1979 and the 2010s, UAW membership fell from 1.5 million to less than 400,000.

Shawn Fain himself oversaw the ratification of last year's "record" contract, which has already been followed by a wave of layoffs. The closures of plants in Belvidere, Lordstown and elsewhere—which Fain now demagogically references as evidence of "free trade's" failures—were all carried out with the support and complicity of the UAW bureaucracy.

"We get divorce, drug addiction, suicide, deaths of despair," he continued. "I don't need to tell you—so many of us in the UAW have lived it." In fact, Fain and his fellow bureaucrats have not "lived it"—they are shielded from such devastating social problems by their six-figure salaries—they have helped to create it. The UAW, whose officials sit on joint labor-

management “safety boards,” has stayed almost completely silent on the death of skilled tradesman Ronald Adams Sr. at the Dundee Engine Plant. By contrast, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has launched an extensive investigation.

There is a long and bloody history of racist agitation by the American trade union bureaucracy, from the exclusion of black workers and Chinese immigrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to the anti-Japanese campaigns of the 1980s. None of these ever saved a single job. It was in the climate of anti-Japanese hysteria, whipped up by the unions and the Democratic Party, that Chinese American engineer Vincent Chin was beaten to death in 1982 by a Chrysler supervisor and his unemployed son in Detroit.

Fain’s remarks targeting Mexican workers carry the same dangerous implications. In pouring fuel on the fire, he and the UAW bureaucracy bear direct political responsibility for acts of violence against immigrants and Latinos in the United States.

Fain’s claim that tariffs will “save American jobs” flies in the face of reality. The previous rounds of tariffs under both Trump and Biden produced widespread layoffs, higher consumer prices and deepening economic crisis. The global nature of production, organized across borders through international supply chains, makes it impossible to defend workers’ interests on a national basis. But at the same time, these conditions create the objective foundation for a globally unified working class movement. It is precisely this potential that terrifies the bureaucracy.

Fain’s assertion that tariffs must be “well designed” is meant to deflect from the real class content of these policies, which is not to save “American” jobs—it has already led to layoffs across the auto industry—but to defend the interests of American capitalism. This includes both against foreign rivals and against the working class at home, who bear the cost in the form of inflation, wage suppression and job cuts.

The tariffs are also part of a broader preparation for wars, including the rapidly expanding military intervention against Iran. They are aimed at reorganizing American supply chains to prepare for war against China and other countries deemed enemies of US imperialism. As in the 1930s, the turn toward protectionism is already leading towards economic crisis, trade war and ultimately world war.

Fain and the UAW bureaucrats are eager to demonstrate their usefulness in the military buildup taking place in advance of such a war, with Fain continuously citing the American war economy during World War II as the model for today. In fact, Fain began raising this under Biden, who in turn referred to the unions as his “domestic NATO.”

The UAW practically presents a Third World War as a jobs program to lower unemployment. In a recent interview, Fain suggested using “excess capacity” in the auto industry to build “tanks and planes and bombs.” Meanwhile, the UAW has sold

out workers at defense plants, including at jet engine maker Rolls-Royce, Lockheed Martin and submarine builder Electric Boat.

The bureaucracy is a privileged social layer, integrated into the capitalist state and dependent on labor peace to maintain its privileges. It has a counterpart in Mexico in the corrupt gangster *charro* unions, long aligned with the government. The UAW, working closely with the State Department and US labor NGOs, is playing a central role in efforts to replace these *charros* with “independent” unions, including SINTTIA, that are no less tied to American imperialism.

Implicated in this are pseudo-left groups, who reject the fight for socialism in the working class in favor of building “reform” factions within the bureaucracy. Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), which essentially ran Fain’s election campaign and rode his coattails into higher office, has collapsed as a result of it being compromised in the eyes of workers by the UAW bureaucracy’s policies, including support for Trump’s tariffs. Fain’s inner circle includes the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)-aligned Jonah Furman and Chris Brooks.

This is not an exception but the universal outcome of such groups. The same pattern is playing out in the Teamsters, where Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) is preparing to run for reelection alongside Sean O’Brien, now an even more open supporter of Trump than Fain.

The internal regime of the UAW mirrors the thuggishness and brutality of the Trump administration. A report yesterday by a court-appointed monitor (a position created after a corruption scandal claimed much of the union’s top leadership) revealed that Fain allegedly threatened to “slit the f***ing throats” of anyone who challenged his inner circle. The WSWS will have more to say on this in the coming days.

The UAW’s reaction to last week’s protests is a warning, that the only way to bring the force of the working class to bear against the Trump administration is through a rebellion against the trade union apparatus. The fight against fascism and war must be connected with a fight to overthrow the bureaucratic dictatorships in the trade unions, which function as little more than an industrial police force. This means the development of rank-and-file committees, new forms of struggle controlled by workers and based on an international fight against capitalism.



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