

UAW and labor bureaucrats mouth support for general strike while keeping workers on the job

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On Friday, for the second time in two weeks, mass demonstrations are taking place in Minneapolis and across the country against the Trump administration's campaign of murder and terror.

Among the millions opposed to fascism in the United States support for the idea of a general strike is growing. Community groups, as in last week's demonstrations, have urged walkouts to coincide with Friday's protests.

The potential for such a movement is shown by the growth of individual strikes across the country, including of 15,000 nurses in New York City and 31,000 nurses and other healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente on the West Coast. However, a general strike means, above all, the emergence of the working class as the leading force in the fight against dictatorship. It requires the shutdown of factories, docks, warehouses and other strategic workplaces all across the country.

What is taking place, however, does not yet constitute a general strike. The principal reason for this is the refusal of the union bureaucracy to call one. Instead, the bureaucracy has issued hollow verbal statements claiming to "stand in solidarity," to "support Minnesotans" and even to support a "general strike" in the abstract—without making any actual calls for strike action.

The preparation of a genuine general strike requires a rebellion by the rank and file against the pro-corporate union bureaucracy, which is tied not only to the Democratic Party but even to Trump himself.

On Wednesday, the United Auto Workers issued a belated statement on the execution-style murder of Alex Petti. Acknowledging that Petti—a Veterans Administration hospital nurse and member of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)—was killed while "exercising his constitutional right," the statement declared that the murder posed a threat to "our freedoms" and the U.S. Constitution.

The statement continued: "In moments like these, the labor movement must not be silent. Unions in Minnesota took action

last Friday, January 23, by participating in a general strike and protested across the state."

As a matter of fact, what happened on January 23 was not a general strike. While local unions issued statements of support, they refused to call their members on strike, citing contract technicalities negotiated by the union apparatus.

At a meeting last Tuesday of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) local in Minneapolis, workers spoke out about their experiences with ICE on the job and voiced support for action. But according to one source within the union, "there has been no real official word sent out on what we'd like our members to do." Neither the Minnesota AFL-CIO nor the Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation has issued a call for strike action on Friday.

The UAW says that the "labor movement" must not be silent. However, having acknowledged that workers' rights are at stake, the UAW proposes *no action whatsoever* to mobilize its 1.1 million members. The participation of hundreds of thousands of autoworkers, joined by graduate students who are also UAW members—including tens of thousands of University of California graduate students who are taking a strike vote next week—would have an immediate galvanizing effect nationwide.

The UAW's president, Shawn Fain, says he is for a general strike—but only in May of 2028. This far-off date was selected to allow ample time to wriggle out of any commitment or for workers to forget. Now, when a movement for a general strike is developing, he pointedly refuses to call one.

Union bureaucrats across the country are stonewalling or limiting strike action. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has called for protests and actions on Friday—after school gets out in the afternoon. At the same time, it is censoring Facebook comments calling for strike action. Other unions that have called "actions" are limiting them to a few minutes, a lunch break or to middle class consumer boycotts.

For all of their claims to support "democracy," the bureaucrats run the unions as dictatorships. They routinely override contract votes and retaliate against opposition workers. Reports by a federal monitor cite a "toxic culture of division

and retaliation at the highest levels of the [UAW].”

Autoworkers should demand that the UAW sanction participation in a general strike. Putting money—drawn from workers’ dues money—where its mouth is, the union’s \$800 million strike fund must be put to use for the struggle against dictatorship, not for lining pockets.

Claims that “no-strike” clauses prevent action cannot be accepted as an excuse, since these clauses were negotiated by the UAW itself and, as the union leadership now admits, the very right to strike itself is at stake.

Workers’ actions, however, must not depend on the approval or sanction of the union bureaucracy. The rank and file must establish the committees to transfer power and decision making to the shop floor. Workers should call mass meetings at every factory local and pass resolutions demanding strike action.

It should not be forgotten that in 2020, wildcat strikes shut down the auto industry during the first wave of COVID-19, in opposition to attempts by UAW officials to keep plants open. In 2024, University of California graduate students forced strike action against a crackdown on Gaza protests after months of delays by UAW officials.

If democratic rights are to be defended, it can only be done by the working class. The Democratic Party, while declaring support for the protests in order to get out in front of them, has reached a deal with Trump to continue funding ICE and the Department of Homeland Security, blocking an immediate government shutdown.

For decades, the union bureaucrats have blocked strikes and imposed sellout contracts which have destroyed tens of millions of jobs, while their assets and salaries have soared. In the UAW, the \$800 million strike fund is treated as a piggy bank, while unspeakable levels of corruption produced a scandal that brought down two of Fain’s predecessors.

Today, the union is helping automakers slash thousands of jobs in order to impose the costs of the electric vehicle transition onto workers. They have remained silent as workers are maimed and killed on the job, such as skilled tradesman Ronald Adams, who died last April when he was crushed by a piece of machinery. Adams’ death would have passed by in silence were it not for an independent inquiry launched by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which held a public hearing last July.

To be blunt, the union bureaucracy would welcome it if the government ripped up the right to strike. It already regularly inserts anti-strike clauses in contracts as a cudgel against rank-and-file resistance.

The railroad unions used the near-total ban on strikes under the Railway Labor Act to frighten railroaders and even allowed Congress to ban a strike outright once the act’s provisions were exhausted in 2022. The postal unions, whose members are banned from striking because they are federal employees, routinely impose contracts through binding arbitration.

For US imperialism, the bureaucrats function as a key means

of securing the “home front.” In 2024, Biden quipped that the AFL-CIO was his “domestic NATO.” Fain had extensive ties to the Biden administration, during which he trumpeted the need for a war economy. Today, he promotes Trump’s “America First” trade war, claiming it is possible to oppose fascist domestic policies while supporting fascist foreign and economic policies. This makes the UAW statement declaring “support” for Minneapolis especially hypocritical.

The same pattern is repeated across the labor bureaucracy. The Teamsters have helped UPS cut 68,000 jobs since the start of last year; another 30,000 jobs are on the chopping block so far this year. Under General President Sean O’Brien, the Teamsters union has emerged as a major supporter of Trump.

Both Fain and O’Brien were trumpeted as “reform” candidates by *Labor Notes*, the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left groups. *Jacobin* magazine, which has close ties to the DSA, has relentlessly defended Fain’s overtures to Trump. Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a *Labor Notes*-backed caucus of the Teamsters bureaucracy, has already endorsed O’Brien’s re-election as the union’s general president.

They are the latest experience proving that the bureaucracy cannot be reformed; it must be overthrown. Will Lehman, a leading member of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committee, ran for UAW president in 2022 and won broad support on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and replacing them with rank-and-file committees controlled by autoworkers themselves.

The ability of the working class to break through the resistance of the bureaucrats and build a movement towards a general strike depends upon establishing its independence and taking the initiative. A network of rank-and-file committees must be built in workplaces across the country, challenging the sabotage of the apparatus and coordinating joint actions with or without the latter’s approval. Rejecting the “America First” poison which the bureaucrats support, they must unite in defense of the rights of immigrants and workers all over the world.



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