

UAW white paper “Trade and the American Dream”: A brief for economic nationalism and imperialist war

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On July 1, the Trump administration refused to renew the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) at the pact’s six-year joint review. The agreement remains in force, but Washington’s refusal converts every subsequent annual review into an instrument of extortion, allowing the United States to extract fresh concessions from Canada and Mexico.

Trump is using the threat of withdrawal, tariffs and restricted access to the US market to discipline Canada and Mexico, force them to line up behind Washington’s trade war, and subordinate the continent to the requirements of American “national security.” The same strategy underlies his threats to annex Canada, militarize the border, attack Mexico under the pretext of fighting drugs, and use executive power to tear up existing legal and constitutional restraints.

The Trump administration wants to transform North America into a closed economic and military bloc—a Fortress North America—as it escalates trade war against China and launches military aggression around the world.

The United Auto Workers bureaucracy supports this imperialist project and is offering its services. Days before the USMCA deadline, the UAW released a 36-page white paper, “Trade and the American Dream: NAFTA, the USMCA, and the Future of the Working Class.” Its purpose is to demonstrate that the UAW can help administer trade war, supply-chain restructuring and labor discipline across the continent.

The UAW claims it cares about protecting “American” jobs while it is helping the Big Three and parts makers destroy them. Thousands of Big Three autoworkers have lost their jobs since the UAW secured ratification of the 2023 contracts under false pretenses. Even as the white paper was released, the union was holding a contract vote at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan at proverbial gunpoint inside the factory, to force through a deal workers rejected three times. At the same time, the UAW was also pushing through an agreement allowing the closure of International’s truck assembly plant in Springfield, Ohio.

The white paper builds its case on struggles the bureaucracy itself betrayed. It celebrates the 2023 Mack Trucks strike without mentioning that workers rejected the deal Fain personally endorsed by 73 percent before the apparatus isolated the strike and shut it down. It invokes the 2021 John Deere strike, in which workers twice voted down UAW-backed agreements before the bureaucracy forced through a third.

In reality, it is the interests of the union apparatus, and not the workers, that animate the document. Far from opposing the annual reviews with which Washington will bludgeon Canada and Mexico, the UAW bureaucracy demands a “seat at the table” where the bludgeoning is organized.

The document also bears the political fingerprints of the Democratic Socialists of America and Labor Notes advisers in Fain’s inner circle, who have worked vigorously to present the bureaucracy’s

accommodation to Trump’s trade-war agenda as “working class” politics. The document’s real content is disguised with “pro-worker” phraseology and feigned concern for Mexican autoworkers.

Far-right nationalism, not working class internationalism

The white paper demands a “top-to-bottom revamp” of the USMCA enforced by tariffs and concludes with an ultimatum indistinguishable from Trump’s own: a new deal on America-first terms, or “the United States must get out of NAFTA 2.0.”

The UAW goes out of its way to praise the first Trump administration’s trade policy. It presents Trump’s appointment of Robert Lighthizer as US Trade Representative as the selection of an official “who had a history of working with labor,” credits Lighthizer, a virulent anti-Chinese hawk, with working with unions and Congressional Democrats, and describes the USMCA as including “real improvements” in workers’ rights. The bureaucracy’s complaint is that Trump’s trade-war framework did not go far enough.

UAW President Shawn Fain states the document’s central argument in his introduction: “There is no future for the US working class that doesn’t address the free trade disaster ... trade is at the heart of the rise of global authoritarianism, wealth inequality, and the political weakness of the working class.”

This is not a “left” or “pro-worker” argument, but the classic position of the extreme right, which has always sought to counterpose workers supposedly rooted in the “national” soil to disloyal foreign or “international” bankers.

By “authoritarianism,” Fain does not mean the Trump administration, with which Fain is collaborating. In fact, his reference to the “free trade disaster” is lifted verbatim from the vocabulary of Trump’s trade war. He is using the standard euphemism for countries targeted for regime change by American imperialism, including China, Russia and Iran.

Socialists oppose capitalist “free trade” agreements such as NAFTA and the USMCA, through which corporations shift production across borders, pit workers against one another and scour the world for cheaper labor. But the answer to capitalist globalization is not to shrink the world economy back into the national state, but international working-class unity against the corporations and banks, above all against American imperialism, the center of the world financial system and the chief organizer of the drive to world war. Its aim must be to take control of this international system of production and run it in the interests of the working class, not profit.

The ability of the corporations to pit workers in different countries

against one another depends above all on the nationalism of the trade union bureaucracies. Without the UAW, Unifor and the officially sanctioned Mexican unions teaching workers to see one another as competitors rather than allies, the global organization of production could not produce a global “race to the bottom” between them.

Attacks on Mexican workers

Section 4 declares that a new agreement must include three core objectives: “Build Here to Sell Here” provisions, “Real Labor Rights” and “Strong Standards on Pay & Other Key Issues.” It proposes “expanded labor rights in all three countries, and a tri-national commission to safeguard the future of manufacturing across the continent.”

Under the heading “Build Here to Sell Here,” the UAW demands that corporations balance production and sales across North America or face punitive tariffs. The white paper says companies seeking tariff relief would have to meet a “1-to-1 production-to-sales quota.”

The UAW poses as a friend of Mexican autoworkers, who, it says, are “too poor to buy the cars they produce.” But its proposal means mass unemployment and poverty for these same workers. The white paper complains that the US produces only 61 cars for every 100 sold domestically, while Mexico produces 249 for every 100 bought. A one-to-one quota would require a drastic reduction of Mexican auto production, wiping out hundreds of thousands of direct jobs and many more across export-dependent regional economies.

The white paper never answers the obvious question: how will Mexican workers’ living standards be raised by shutting their factories and throwing them into the streets?

The white paper’s discussion of “independent unions” in Mexico continues along the same lines. For decades, the old charro unions—state-backed company unions that signed sweetheart contracts, intimidated workers and suppressed strikes—served as the chief instruments of labor control in Mexico. These organizations are now hated and discredited. After explosive struggles such as Matamoros and Silao, Washington, the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center and the union bureaucracies promoted a new layer of “independent” unions through the USMCA labor chapter and the Rapid Response Mechanism, seeking to contain Mexican workers within a framework supervised by American imperialism and its labor agents.

The UAW proposes to make American union officials paid overseers in the colonial exploitation of Mexican workers. Under the heading “Build a System of True Tri-National Labor Rights,” the white paper calls for a new agreement that “establishes the right of U.S. unions to provide technical support to Mexican workers and independent unions.” It complains that the US Department of Labor has “just five labor attachés in Mexico” to combat “labor abuse and unfair trade practices” and adds that “staff from U.S. unions could dramatically expand support for Mexican workers if tariff revenues were used to support their work.” The UAW boasts that it already has “dedicated UAW staff in Mexico City and Washington” through its Mexico Solidarity Project.

The American union bureaucrats would operate among Mexican workers not as representatives of a common struggle against the corporations, but as personnel of a US-dominated labor-policing framework. The same tariff regime that threatens mass unemployment in Mexico would create new paid positions, institutional authority and privileges for UAW officials, paid for by the US government revenues from tariffs against Mexico.

A corporatist North American dictatorship

The culmination of the bureaucracy’s program is the “tri-national commission.” The white paper proposes a body of “unions, governments and academic experts” to work with industry in “rationalizing supply chains.” In plain language, this means the joint administration of austerity: state-supervised capacity cuts, plant closures, wage controls and production mandates enforced over the heads of workers in all three countries. The unions would receive an official role in imposing across the continent the restructuring demanded by the corporations and the American state.

This is corporatism: the integration of the unions into the state and management to suppress the class struggle in the name of defending the nation. The historical origins of corporatism are in Mussolini’s fascist Italy, which created state-controlled syndicates and corporations that brought together employers, fascist officials and so-called labor representatives under the doctrine that class conflict had to be subordinated to the national interest.

The UAW proposes a North American variant adapted to present conditions: unions, governments, academics and industry jointly reorganizing production, imposing labor discipline and subordinating workers to the demands of “competitiveness” and “national security.”

History of betrayals, justified by “America First”

The UAW’s “America First” nationalism, which it has promoted since long before Trump ever ran for office, never saved jobs. It justified the destruction of jobs in the name of “competitiveness,” while scapegoating foreign workers for attacks the bureaucracy helped management carry out.

This is the latest stage in a process that began more than four decades ago. The UAW responded to the crisis of American capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s with nationalism and corporatism. During the 1979-80 Chrysler bailout, UAW President Douglas Fraser took a seat on the company’s board while the union helped destroy 60,000 jobs and imposed massive wage and benefit concessions in the name of making American capitalism “competitive.”

Far from opposing the union-busting that began with Reagan’s firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers, the UAW and AFL-CIO shut down every form of working class resistance, agreeing that slashed living standards and industrial shutdowns were necessary to restore the profitability of American capitalism.

This was accompanied by a racist campaign that told workers their enemy was the foreign worker “stealing” American jobs, not the auto bosses. The white paper discreetly omits this poisoned atmosphere, which led to the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American draftsman beaten to death by a Chrysler plant supervisor and his laid-off stepson.

In 1978, Democrats and Republicans passed the Labor Management Cooperation Act, legalizing the direct transfer of corporate money into joint labor-management programs overseen by the union apparatus. The result was the open transformation of the unions into a layer of management.

Preparing the home front for world war

The UAW’s program today develops the old nationalism of the

bureaucracy under conditions created by the historic decline of American imperialism. The United States is driven into ever more ruthless conflict against its rivals abroad and class war at home, seeking to reverse its economic decline through trade war, militarism and dictatorship. This has already produced the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, US support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the war against Iran and advanced preparations for future war against China.

Fain has repeatedly invoked the UAW's World War II alliance with the auto companies and the Roosevelt administration in the so-called Arsenal of Democracy—the years when the union enforced the no-strike pledge, policed speedup and victimized the leaders of wartime wildcat strikes, while the Roosevelt government jailed Trotskyist opponents of imperialist war.

Under Biden, Fain and the UAW apparatus functioned as semi-official partners of the administration. Biden appointed Fain to the President's Export Council, an advisory body on trade policy that includes major corporate executives. In 2024, Biden gave a speech describing the AFL-CIO as his "domestic NATO." This meant that the unions were to perform the role of disciplining opposition and preparing the country for war.

The same process extends across the union bureaucracy. The Teamsters under Sean O'Brien, the International Longshoremen's Association and other labor apparatuses have embraced protectionism, tariffs and overtures to Trump. Their appeals to the would-be Führer are the highest expression of their integration with American capitalism and their hostility to the independent interests of the working class.

The DSA and Labor Notes milieu supplies the "left" credentials for this nationalist program. They have relentlessly defended Fain while he adapts to Trump's trade war, presenting tariffs and national industrial policy as tools for workers rather than instruments of American capitalism. Their nationalism ideologically subordinates workers to Wall Street and the American state, leaving them politically disarmed before fascism, dictatorship and war.

This is the political service rendered by the pseudo-left not only to the bureaucracy, but to Trump and the extreme right. It takes workers and young people repelled by Trump and demobilizes their opposition back behind the union apparatus, the Democratic Party and the national interests of American capitalism.

Opposition to the nationalist and pro-war bureaucracy has been advanced by Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist who first ran for UAW president in 2022 and was nominated at last month's UAW Constitutional Convention to stand again in 2026. In a May 2025 *Newsweek* editorial, Lehman wrote that Fain's claims that Trump's tariffs "would defend our jobs and livelihoods" were "a fraud and a deadly danger to the entire working class." They are preparations for war with China, he said, whipping up hatred against Chinese workers "who are not our enemies but our class brothers and sisters."

He continued:

Workers in the U.S. must reject the lie that we can only save our jobs at the expense of workers in other countries. We can only defend our interests by uniting with our class brothers and sisters throughout the world.

That's why I urge autoworkers to form rank-and-file committees in every plant and to join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The corporations are globally coordinated. We must be too.

We don't need a trade war. We don't need nationalism. We need a new strategy: internationalism and socialism. Not backing the nationalist competition between different corporations, but creating a society based on genuine equality, in which the global economy is controlled by the workers and for the workers.

There are no national solutions to the global crisis of capitalism. The task before workers in the US, Canada, Mexico and internationally is to build rank-and-file committees in every plant, independent of the union bureaucracies, and join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Only internationalism and socialism can answer trade war, imperialist war and the corporatist program of every labor apparatus that serves the ruling class under the banner of the nation.



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