Jacobin advises union bureaucracy on how to respond to wave of contract rejection

Tom Hall
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An expanding rebellion by rank-and-file workers is colliding ever more openly with the trade union bureaucracy. One of the sharpest expressions of this is the repeated rejection of sellout tentative agreements endorsed by union officials and worked out with management.

At least 16 contracts endorsed by the unions have been rejected so far in 2026 alone, on pace to exceed the high of 2026 set in 2021. Over the past several months, workers at BP's Whiting, Indiana refinery rejected a six-year concessions contract by 98.3 percent. Roughly 1,700 engineers and train-service workers at Canadian Pacific Kansas City defeated parallel nine-year contracts covering operations across 11 states. In Canada, British Columbia nurses rejected a union-endorsed agreement by 67 percent, while workers at Coast Mountain Bus Company, which employs more than 5,000 Unifor members in Metro Vancouver, voted down another tentative agreement.

Parts workers in the United Auto Workers have rejected at least six contracts this year, at Bridgewater Interior, Dana and Nexteer. At Nexteer in Saginaw, Michigan workers voted down three deals, while a rank-and-file committee was formed which called on workers to "become the authority" and enforce their strike vote. The UAW responded by colluding with management to ram through a fourth vote, held on the factory floor and firing worker Antwiane Sanders for opposing the contract.

This growing collision between workers and the apparatus is expressed in the growth of rank-and-file committees fighting to mobilize workers against sellouts and overthrow the corrupt union apparatus. This is the program advanced by Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman in his campaign for UAW president.

The bureaucracy's fear of this movement is encapsulated in an article published last week by *Jacobin*, "What to Do When Your Union Contract Is Voted Down."

Its author, Chris Brooks, was until recently the chief of staff and top strategist for United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain. A former Labor Notes organizer and NewsGuild official, Brooks was brought into the UAW after Fain took office in 2023. He helped devise the "Stand Up" strike at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis, a limited walkout which was followed by sellout contracts and thousands of layoffs.

Brooks-a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)-resigned in December rather than face suspension after the court-appointed UAW monitor exposed his role in inserting false allegations into a report used to strip UAW Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Mock of her duties. *Jacobin* promptly made him a labor columnist.

Brooks's career—and his article—expose the political function of *Jacobin*, the DSA and Labor Notes as advisers and leading personnel within the union apparatus. They specialize in particular in supplying rhetorical and organizational techniques through which officials seek to impose management's demands on an increasingly militant workforce.

Brooks begins with an anecdote from a closed-door gathering of top union officials and corporate executives:

> It was December 2022, and I was attending a convening of company executives and labor leaders hosted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management. A line of corporate bigwigs from long-unionized Fortune 500 companies were heatedly voicing their exasperation over the new bargaining climate in the country.
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> Apparently, all of these companies were suffering from the same affliction: tentative agreements were being voted down by union members. In some cases, contracts went down by large margins several times before finally passing.
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> "It's especially bad with the young workers, who have completely unreasonable expectations,' said one HR executive from a company that would go on to make nearly a billion dollars in net income that year.
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> "They want the return of cost-of-living adjustments and pensions. It's completely unrealistic with where the economy is today," added another executive from a company with a market capitalization of more than $30 billion. "The union leaders are often just as upset as we are about how out of touch their membership is."

Significantly, Brooks never challenges the executive's statement about the hostility of union officials to their own members or even tries to qualify it as the product only of a particular kind of "business unionism." This is because it accurately expresses the thinking of an apparatus, including Brooks himself, that functions as an industrial police force and whose distinct social interests are bound up with its relations in the corporate boardroom.

He also makes no attempt to explain why the unions keep bringing back agreements that workers find unacceptable. The betrayals disappear from his account, leaving only the troublesome response of the membership.

Brooks' presence at this event suggests he was already being groomed in 2022 for prominent positions within the apparatus. According to the official MIT report, this was an invitation-only dinner and daylong meeting of more than 60 corporate executives, union leaders, government officials, academics and representatives of advocacy groups. President Biden's Labor Secretary Marty Walsh addressed the gathering by video over lunch.

The event was shrouded in secrecy. MIT's report names none of the participants or their affiliations except the formal presenters.

How to contain the growing wave of contract rejections was a particular focus. A facilitator summarized one small-group discussion: "Management believes that the union leaders are bargaining in good faith and are strong partners at the table." The report nevertheless described a serious gap between the officials and rank-and-file workers and placed the problem in a summary slide: "Results: Growing number of contract rejections."

Months after attending the event, Brooks got a job as chief of staff for the UAW under Fain. Following Fain's election in a vote marred by mass voter suppression, a leaked transition document identified a major priority as managing workers "unreasonable expectations"—almost identical language to the executive at the MIT gathering.

In his Jacobin piece, Brooks tries to cover his tracks. "I applaud workers who are making company executives wring their hands over their refusal to accept that status quo in bargaining." He adds: "Our standard of living has declined under the combined pressure of stagnant wages and rising prices." In reality, the income of the apparatus is *increasing* while workers paltry raises are eaten up by inflation. Brooks, for example, received $211,968 from the UAW in 2025.

His applause quickly gives way to a warning that contract rejection brings "real dangers." He writes:

> Workers might go out on a long and painful strike only to return with an offer little better than the one they originally shot down. The experience can divide and demoralize both the membership and the bargaining team. *Bargainers can feel abandoned by the members who elected them* [emphasis added]. Members can feel betrayed by the bargainers they elected. In the end, the union feels weaker, and the boss appears stronger.

The complaint that bargainers feel "abandoned" by the members opposed to their sellouts recalls the quip by German satirist Bertolt Brecht, in response to the brutal suppression of the 1953 East German uprising, that "the government [should] dissolve the people and elect another."

Workers only become "weaker," to use Brooks' words, when officials override their democratic will and sabotage their struggle. The "long and painful strikes" which Brooks cynically refers to are those where workers are isolated on the picket lines by the bureaucracy, in order to soften them up to accept the same deal. For example, at GE Aerospace last year, the UAW isolated 640 workers for three weeks on $500 weekly strike pay, then gave them the full 100-page agreement only two days before the ratification vote.

The central issue Brooks is grappling with is how to conceal this conflict of class interests and prevent a rebellion by giving workers a controlled appearance of involvement. The methods advocated by Brooks originated from the late Jane McAlevey, an Service Employees International Union (SEIU) official who became a union consultant. Her model combined surveys, structured one-on-one discussions and "open bargaining" under the tight control of the apparatus. She advocated the use of "contract campaigns" whose purpose is to create the appearance of democratic participation to better market contracts worked out by the apparatus with management.

Brooks presents the 2023 "Stand Up" strike at GM, Ford and Stellantis as the crowning achievement of this model. But at its height, fewer than one-third of the 150,000 Big Three workers were on strike, while the UAW kept the majority working, in some cases overtime, at the remaining plants. Officials announced agreements and ordered strikers back to work before workers had seen the contracts. The deals were followed immediately by the firing of more than 2,000 Stellantis temporary workers and then by thousands of additional layoffs across the three companies.

The same model was used at UPS in 2023. Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the DSA organized rallies, practice pickets and a nationwide "Strike Ready" campaign, then marketed the agreement brought back by the Teamsters after Sean O'Brien blocked a widely anticipated strike. UPS eliminated 48,000 positions in 2025 and announced plans to shed another 30,000 in 2026.

Brooks writes:

> One of my proudest accomplishments as the United Auto Workers' (UAW) top strategist was creating the Department of Bargaining Strategies. We didn't know it at the time, but one of the new department's top priorities would quickly become assisting locals whose contracts had been voted down. Time and again, we saw two interrelated problems driving no votes: local bargaining teams were not ambitious enough in bargaining, and they had not built the high-participation campaigns necessary to win more.

Brooks says the department was "staffed with a combination of experienced bargainer-organizers hired from other unions and some of the most talented staff from the rank and file." In fact, one of those assigned to it was Raymond Jensen Jr., formerly assistant director of UAW Region 9. On August 4, the federal monitor suspended Jensen for two years after he posted a death threat against Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman. Jensen, a supporter of Fain, posted an AI-generated image depicting Lehman bound, gagged and bleeding, with a masked gunman pointing an automatic rifle at him. Jensen received approximately $202,000 from the UAW in 2025.

The Department of Bargaining Strategies was deeply involved in the sabotage of the American Axle strike this June. Before the walkout, the UAW allowed management to run the factories at full tilt to stockpile roughly two weeks of axles. Once the strike began, the UAW kept it confined to the single plant-while blocking strikes at Bridgewater, Nexteer and Dana-and shut it down after ten days before GM faced any axle shortages. Workers were made to vote after officials warned that rejection could expose them to permanent replacement.

The pseudo-left has risen inside the bureaucracy precisely at the point when union officials are employing more dirty tricks and anti-democratic methods to counter the growing rank-and-file revolt. Its specialists in communications, "organizing" and corporatist labor relations seek to keep workers confined within institutions that impose layoffs, concessions and state policy. Their central concern is the danger that workers will organize new forms of struggle to break the grip of the bureaucracy.

It performs the same function in bourgeois politics. New York's DSA mayor Zohran Mamdani met twice with Trump at the White House, retained billionaire heiress Jessica Tisch as police commissioner and abandoned campaign promises for free buses and even limited taxes on the rich. The populist campaign supplied a route into office; once there, Mamdani adapted himself directly to the requirements of the financial oligarchy and the capitalist state.

These politics express the interests of a narrow, affluent upper-middle-class layer that includes union functionaries, academics, nonprofit executives and professional political operatives. Its income and status depend upon positions inside the unions, the Democratic Party and the state. The class struggle threatens those positions. Populist rhetoric allows this layer to speak in the name of workers while defending institutions whose authority depends upon suppressing them.

The alternative is emerging in the rank-and-file rebellion that Brooks seeks to contain. The campaign of Will Lehman gives it a conscious program: abolish the union bureaucracy, transfer power and control over the unions' resources to workers on the shop floor, and build rank-and-file committees independent of the apparatus. The committees at Nexteer, Mack Trucks and other workplaces organize workers to formulate their own demands, oversee votes and unite their struggles across plants and national borders. The decisive issue is who exercises control. Brooks proposes new machinery for the officials. Workers require organizations of their own.

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