

Chasm between workers and union apparatus on full display at Detroit Labor Day parade

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Detroit's 2026 Labor Day parade put on full display the immense chasm between rank-and-file workers and the trade union apparatus. Under conditions of the Trump administration's fascistic assault on democratic rights, the ongoing war against Iran, rampaging inflation, expanding ICE terror against immigrants and threats to rig or even cancel upcoming Congressional elections, the unions were incapable of rallying more than a few thousand workers in a metropolitan area with more than 300,000 union members.

None of the major speakers, including United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain and Metro Detroit AFL-CIO President Daryl Newman, even so much as mentioned Trump or the fascist danger. Nor were any slogans advanced pointing to a way to fight back against the growing existential threats workers face on multiplying fronts, including AI and automation job cuts and the mounting toll of workplace deaths.

Placards promoting US-Canadian worker solidarity, and by implication opposition to the US-Canada trade war, were prominent on the march. However, Trump's ongoing tariff war against Canada and the threat to annex Canada as the 51st US state were not mentioned by Fain or other major speakers, nor was any appeal made for international working class unity. This is no surprise given the fact that Fain is one of the biggest supporters of Trump's trade war measures, claiming that the layoff of workers in Canada and other countries benefits workers in the US.

As it has in previous years the parade served as a campaign event for the Democratic Party. UAW-endorsed US Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed marched alongside Fain at the front of the UAW contingent at the parade. Also attending were other prominent Democratic politicians, including gubernatorial candidate Jocelyn Benson, and US Representatives Debbie Dingell and Rashida Tlaib, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

There is a broad radicalization taking place in the United States, reflected in the continuing contract rejection votes, the mass opposition to the attacks on immigrant workers and massive No Kings protests. However, the discredited UAW apparatus, which oversees 110,000 active members in the Detroit area, was incapable of organizing delegations of more than a few hundred workers, even from the largest plants in the area, such as the Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant and Ford Rouge complex. The turnout mobilized by other unions was equally dismal.

The Detroit Labor Day was a further expression of the fact that the American trade unions are unions in name only. Under the grip of the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracy, they have degenerated into appendages of corporate management and the capitalist state. Over the last 50 years they have presided over the deindustrialization of Detroit

and other Rust Belt cities. The long ago demise of what was once the American labor movement has coincided with ever smaller turnouts at Labor Day parades, which once involved hundreds of thousands of workers and their families.

Mass layoffs and concessions imposed by the unions have led to the decimation of the jobs and living standards of broad sections of the working class, the rise of poverty, drug addiction and early death. This is the outcome of the program of America First nationalism and corporatism advanced by the union bureaucracies, subordinating the interests of workers to the corporations and the US imperialist state.

By the time Fain spoke, the crowd at Roosevelt Park had dwindled to perhaps 50 or 60 people. Fain, who is running for re-election this year along with other top UAW officers, postured as a champion of workers with his usual demagoguery lambasting billionaires despite being a tool of the auto companies himself. Like other speakers he focused on trying to boost turnout for Democratic candidates in the upcoming November elections, where a US Senate seat and the governor's office will be decided along with Michigan's 13 House seats. Michigan is considered a key battleground in the Democrats' efforts to capture control of Congress.

With an eye to his re-election where he faces a challenge from rank-and-file autoworker and socialist Will Lehman, Fain praised the sellout contracts at parts suppliers American Axle, Three Rivers, Michigan and Bridgewater Interiors in the Detroit suburbs as victories. "Those victories prove something. When workers stay together, the impossible starts to look possible," citing the supposed \$35 an hour top wage won at Bridgewater. He did not mention that the UAW rushed through both deals without providing workers time to review the full contracts. Nor did he point out that the Bridgewater deal included a starvation-level starting wage of only \$20 an hour.

According to the UAW's contract "highlights," Bridgewater workers would not make the touted \$35 an hour until 2033—three years after the contract expires! At American Axle the \$30 top rate will not be reached until 2030 and will fall far short of workers' demands to restore all concessions and abolish the hated tier system imposed after the UAW sellout of the 2008 strike.

Fain at no point referenced Trump or mentioned the tariff war being mounted against Canada. Fain has boasted about working closely with the Trump administration to impose tariffs on cars and heavy trucks and infamously hailed the decision by Stellantis to shift production of the Jeep Compass to Belvidere, Illinois from its Brampton, Ontario plant—where 3,000 workers had been laid off in 2024.

In a white paper issued in July 2026 "Trade and the American Dream: NAFTA, the USMCA, and the Future of the Working Class," the UAW leadership under Fain called for a "top-to-bottom revamp"

of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) enforced by tariffs couched in America First-style language indistinguishable from Trump.

As the parade assembled, many younger workers stopped by a literature table set up by campaigners for the Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. Campaigners distributed hundreds of copies of the WSWs perspective, “Labor Day 2026: The oligarchy demands that workers pay for the crisis of American capitalism,” which explained that the \$40 trillion government debt has “produced a single response from the ruling class and both of its political parties: make the working class pay.”

Many workers commented on the savage cuts the Trump administration was carrying out on Medicaid and food stamps and the impact of inflation, and expressed their anger over the ongoing war against Iran and the danger of a direct confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia.

Many workers who stopped by the table signed the petition to demand freedom for Bogdan Syrotiuk, the young Ukrainian socialist sentenced to 15 years in prison on bogus charges of treason for calling for the unity of Russian and Ukrainian workers against the war.

A number of young people expressed disillusionment with the Democratic Socialists of America and expressed interest in genuine socialism. A tech worker, who had attended No Kings demonstrations, said he was frustrated with those organizations that claim the Democrats can be changed into a party that defends the working class. “How many times have we heard that? That’s what Bernie said. Biden supported the genocide, and the Democrats are a party that is for the rich. That’s not going to change.” After a discussion, the young worker purchased a copy of *Oligarchy: Trump and the breakdown of American democracy* from Mehring Books.

Stephanie, a special ed teacher from Detroit, carried a sign expressing solidarity with Canadian workers. She opposed the ongoing war against Iran and the corporate oligarchy. She also expressed support for Will Lehman, the socialist candidate for UAW president who is running on a program of abolishing the union apparatus and transferring power to workers on the shop floor. Lehman supporters also had a literature table at the parade and handed out hundreds of flyers.

“That’s the way it should be,” Stephanie said, about rank-and-file workers controlling their own struggles. “How can someone who has never really been in a classroom negotiate for me? We have to do that ourselves.”

Stacy, a worker from General Motors Factory Zero in Detroit, was also carrying a sign expressing support for Canadian workers. Asked what she thought about uniting US, Canadian, Mexican and other international workers, she said, “I’m all for it. We bring together parts from here and there all to build one car, so we have to work together in all ways.” She said, “I hate the tariffs. They’re hurting so many American families, you know, even though I have a good job as a UAW member, things are still hard and tight. You know, these tariffs are hurting everyone. They’re hurting all my family members. So I need a little bit of extra because I’m helping family members that are being pinched even harder than I am. I want them to end, and I don’t support [Shawn] Fain supporting the tariffs.”

At Factory Zero, which builds electric vehicles, she said, “We went from major overtime, like, practically living in the plant to no overtime and cutting a shift. We’ve got over 1,000 brothers and sisters that are on layoff. Before, my bank account was awesome, and

I could travel, no problem. Things are just tight. Regular 40-hour paychecks are still good, but there’s no wiggle room. This is my third location. I’m probably going on to a fourth location soon. The tariffs have hurt us a lot.”

Referring to the UAW apparatus, she said, “A lot of the higher-up people in the union, I never see them. They are always hanging out with management, and I don’t feel represented. We know what’s going on. The higher-ups don’t know what’s going on on the floor, how we are getting treated by management and safety issues that are not getting addressed. I think it has to be more hands-on.”

Stacy said she was upset about the recent deaths at the auto plants, including the death of Stellantis MOPAR worker James Brasher, who received fatal injuries when he fell from the second floor while discarding furniture from the MOPAR headquarters building in Center Line, Michigan, which was set to be closed due to the 2023 UAW contract.

“I actually know James Brasher’s daughter. She’s a volunteer with me at a cat rescue that we both participate in. It’s hit her and her family hard. She’s still devastated, and, you know, her stepmother, who is James’s current wife, is battling cancer, and it’s just sad. My heart just goes out to them, it’s so hard. Things like that should have been avoided. They want to do a certain Takt time (the pace of work that workers need to maintain) on things, and they’re not really concerned about safety when they should be.”

An Amazon worker who stopped by the SEP/IYSSE table spoke about the recent crash of an Amazon jet in Miami that killed five workers. He said, “That is how [Amazon CEO and billionaire] Jeff Bezos gets his money.” The pay he was getting, the worker said, hardly pays his bills.

Escalating layoffs, declining living standards and the erosion of safety—This is the reality workers in the US along with their class brothers globally face, as the unions collude with management to impose the capitalist crisis on the backs of workers.

The solution is not to try to revive these bankrupt organizations but to unite workers in the US, Canada, Mexico and globally in opposition to the nationalist program of the trade unions and build rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracies united internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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