The pseudo-left and the UAW elections: How Labor Notes, Jacobin and UAWD cover for Fain

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Ballots in the election for the top officers of the United Auto Workers went out August 21 and are due back October 5. Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist, is running as the rank-and-file opposition to the administration of UAW President Shawn Fain, calling for the abolition of the union bureaucracy and the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor through rank-and-file committees in every workplace.

The Fain administration came to power in 2023 with the support and assistance of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), *Labor Notes* and the caucus they built inside the UAW, Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD). When he won, they entered his administration as highly paid staffers and advisers. They told autoworkers that Fain's election would usher in an era of "class struggle unionism."

The opposite took place. The "record" contracts of 2023 were followed by thousands of layoffs, including 1,000 jobs eliminated at GM's Factory Zero plant this year. At Mack Trucks, 4,000 workers rejected by 73 percent a deal Fain had called "record"-setting. Fain endorsed Biden and Harris, then embraced Trump's tariffs against Canadian and Mexican workers. A ceasefire resolution on Gaza was passed and disavowed. And the corruption the federal monitor was installed to end continues: the monitor's own reports accuse Fain of seeking favors for his fiancée and her sister.

All of this has exposed what the DSA, *Labor Notes* and UAWD claimed in 2022. It has also exposed their bitter hostility to Lehman in that election, when he warned autoworkers that if Fain were elected the only thing that would change was the salary of the president. UAWD has since broken apart. One faction, regrouped as "UAW Member Action," is campaigning for Fain's reelection. The remnant which retains the UAWD name voted last month not to endorse anyone.

The two factions disagree about Fain, but they are both see the call for the abolition of that bureaucracy as an existential threat to their interests.

The first position is represented by *Labor Notes*. An article by Luis Feliz Leon and Labor Notes founder Jane Slaughter, republished by the DSA-aligned *Jacobin*, presents the election as deciding "whether President Shawn Fain, who became famous for leading 2023's 'stand-up strike' against the Big Three automakers, will be able to continue the union's about-face from its previous employer-friendly ways."

They quote William Hughes of Local 249 at Ford Kansas City: "During my twenty-seven years in the union, I've never seen anything even close to the amount of gains that we've been getting in all these contracts." Fain's opponents, they write, "have downplayed the gains made in the last three years, asserting that any president could have won them." Lehman appears once, in a list of five challengers. Not a word is said about his program.

The article cannot avoid admitting what it is defending. Fain's slate, it reports, "includes candidates who ran against him in the last election as members of the 'Administration Caucus' that had run the union since the 1940s and overseen multiple waves of concessions in recent decades. Some have been won over by the impressive contract results that Fain's bold approach has achieved; others may be inclined to go with the one in power."

Thus, according to *Labor Notes*, the "gains" Fain has secured are so impressive that they have won over the very apparatus that spent decades selling workers out! One is asked to believe that the enforcers of tiers, plant closures and the 2007 and 2009 concessions have been converted to militancy by the force of Fain's example. The truth is simpler. Fain is a creature of the apparatus, and his "opposition" to it was always a fiction. Now, under conditions of growing rank-and-file anger, the apparatus is circling the wagons, and *Labor Notes* has taken up its position inside the circle.

The second position, taken by what remains of UAWD, is the in fact the same position in the garb of neutrality. An August 24 statement by steering committee members Jeremy Bunyaner, Dave Park and Andrew Bergman, published on the website *Daily Struggle*, recalls that UAWD "raised over $200,000 for our campaign, and mobilized hundreds of UAWD volunteers" in 2022.

"We are proud of the organizing that UAWD did four years ago to defeat Ray Curry and elect our UAW Members United Slate, led by President Shawn Fain—but the reality is that our slate was not capable of meaningfully undermining the rule of the old-guard Administration Caucus (AC) in the UAW. Fain has instead been co-opted as the more progressive face of the AC, re-entrenched his former antagonists, and been realigned as their new leader."

His slate, they write, is "a warmed-over reconstitution of the Administration Caucus."

Lehman told autoworkers in 2022, when UAWD was spending $200,000 to denounce him for saying it, that the election of Fain was merely rearranging positions within the apparatus. But having conceded the fact, the authors refuse the conclusion. Instead they hand Fain an alibi. "A UAW president doesn't govern independently—they're tightly constrained by the staff of Solidarity House and the IEB members they sit in coalition with."

Fain "has rightfully argued that he was unable to accomplish as much as he would have liked because he was weighed down by the poor performance and poor politics of his former slate." And: "While a union president can set a strategic direction, there's little they can do to change conditions directly for workers on the shop floor."

So the president of a union of 400,000 members, commanding hundreds of staffers and a strike fund of hundreds of millions of dollars, is a prisoner of his own payroll. Fain, in this telling, was not a 20-year functionary who recited what his DSA advisers wrote for him; he was a militant "ensnared" by circumstances, and the circumstances were the people UAWD put on his slate. This is not an analysis of the bureaucracy. It is the bureaucracy's self-justification, composed by people who were until recently on its staff.

If Fain really is a prisoner of the apparatus, then the conclusion follows that the apparatus must be abolished. That is Lehman's program. It is the one conclusion, however, that the UAWD absolutely rejects. Of the six, candidates the statement says, only Fain and Lehman "even engage in rhetoric of needing to build a working-class fight against the bosses," but Lehman "uses a clear language of class struggle but without any record of shop-floor militancy and is dragged down by a politics that puts his narrow sect over a vision of class struggle unionism."

The UAWD's claim that Lehman puts his "narrow sect" over a vision of "class struggle unionism" expressed its opposition to Lehman's insistence that workers cannot fight through the apparatus but only against it. By "class struggle unionism," the UAWD means a program for replacing one set of officials with another, in which the DSA supplies the rhetoric and takes the staff positions. Lehman's "sectarianism" consists of telling workers this in advance. He did so in 2022, and everything since has confirmed it.

Who is writing this? Bunyaner is a member of Local 2325, the legal aid attorneys' local in New York. Park is a member of Local 2110, which includes clerical and technical workers at New York universities and museums. Bergman, a former official of the DSA-dominated Harvard Graduate Students Union, was dispatched to Detroit to campaign for Fain and is now in Local 22 at Factory Zero, where he did nothing to oppose the elimination of 1,000 jobs. He was also a featured speaker at the recent pro-war Socialism Conference. This is the social layer that accuses a Mack Trucks assembly worker of having "no record of shop-floor militancy."

Lehman's record is known to tens of thousands of autoworkers. In 2021 he helped organize Mack workers' opposition to handling scab truck cabs during the Volvo strike, out of which the Mack Workers Rank-and-File Committee was formed. In 2023 he led the fight at Mack that defeated Fain's "record" contract, a rebellion the trade publication FreightWaves attributed to the "Lehman factor."

In 2022 Lehman ran for president, exposed the disenfranchisement of the membership under the monitor and called for a unified strike of all Big Three workers against Fain's "Stand Up" fraud. Since then he has helped build rank-and-file committees at Nexteer, Eaton, GE Aerospace and several universities, led the IWA-RFC investigation into the death of Ronald Adams Sr. at Stellantis' Dundee Engine plant, and organized workers against the genocide in Gaza and Trump's war on immigrants.

The hostility of the UAWD and those around it is not confined to print. In July, Raymond Jensen Jr., a UAW International staffer and Fain supporter, formerly a UAWD member and a regular guest at *Labor Notes* conferences, posted on Lehman's campaign website an AI-generated image of Lehman bound and bleeding with a masked gunman behind him. Solidarity statements from workers in six countries compelled the monitor to suspend Jensen for two years and bar him for life from elected office. Neither UAWD, the DSA nor *Labor Notes* said a word.

The UAWD statement ends by urging members to "watch the debates" and "learn about the candidates," and observes that "unlike government elections, which determine who leads the ruling class from a small pool of ruling-class candidates, union elections set our collective strategy." The comparison is more apt than its authors intend. The ballot offers a small pool of candidates from the apparatus, and one who proposes to abolish it. UAWD cannot endorse Fain, whose record has discredited it, and it will not endorse Lehman, whose program threatens what it exists to defend. Its "neutrality" is the last service it can perform for the bureaucracy.

The UAW apparatus is a machine of hundreds of full-time officers and staff, paid $107 million in salaries in 2025 according to the union's LM-2 filing, with 560 International staffers drawing more than $100,000 a year and Fain himself $276,378, more than six times the earnings of the average member. Its income does not depend on winning anything for workers. It depends on the dues of 400,000 members—$226.5 million last year—collected under contracts that keep the plants running, and on the goodwill of the companies and the government with which it negotiates.

The DSA and *Labor Notes* layer that entered this apparatus in 2023 did not come to dismantle it but to draw its salaries and supply it with a vocabulary. Lehman's program—the abolition of the apparatus and the transfer of its powers and resources to committees of workers on the shop floor—would end the position of every one of them.

The lesson of the past four years is that the union apparatus cannot be reformed by electing a new face to run it, and that the layer which promoted this illusion in 2022 belongs to the apparatus, not to the workers it deceived. The fight against the Big Three, the trade war and the dictatorship being prepared in Washington requires the independent organization of the rank and file, in the US and internationally.