

Shawn Fain wins Eugene Debs award: Desecrating the memory of America's great socialist leader

Tom Mackaman
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The Debs Foundation announced on September 1 that United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain has been named the 2026 recipient of the Eugene V. Debs Award, named after the founding figure of socialism in America. Fain will receive the award in November at the organization's annual banquet in Terre Haute, Indiana, Debs' hometown, weeks after the centenary of his October 20, 1926 death.

Readers may reasonably wonder if the award was intended as satire. It was not. But the irony, apparently, was lost on those who bestowed it. For there is a vast chasm between the tradition Debs embodied and the one Shawn Fain stands for today. Indeed, Fain represents everything Debs spent his life opposing.

To appreciate the absurdity, one need recall who Debs was. Born in 1855, six years before the beginning of the Civil War, Eugene Victor Debs went to work on the railroads as a boy and rose to become one of the foremost labor leaders in the United States, only to reject the comfortable career of a trade-union official and devote his life to building the socialist movement. "I would be ashamed to admit that I had risen from the ranks," Debs explained. "When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks."

Debs founded the first great industrial union in the US, the American Railway Union and led the 1894 Pullman strike in defiance of the Democratic administration of Grover Cleveland, which answered the railroad workers' struggle with federal troops and imprisoned Debs. His lesson from this first jailing was the need to fight not only for industrial action, but for socialist politics.

Thereafter he never wavered in his fight to break the American working class free of the capitalist political parties. "[W]hat you want to do is quit every capitalist party of every name whatsoever," Debs exhorted. "What you want to do is to organize your class and assert your class interests as capitalists do the interests of the class that is robbing you."

A quarter-century later, Debs again defied a Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, denouncing American entry into the First World War and going to federal prison under the Espionage Act, a jailing which hastened the elderly man's death. But Debs met his sentence with his characteristic moral courage. "While there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free," he told the court.

Like other socialist leaders of the Second International, Debs struggled to balance the conflicting class elements of the party he led. The middle class layers in the Socialist Party gravitated to figures Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit—"A Babbitt of Babbitts is Hillquit, the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists," Trotsky caustically remarked. Debs bitterly opposed Berger's and Hillquit's reformist "sewer socialism." But he set aside his class anger against these figures—often expressed in private letters to his brother, Theodore—and withdrew from public fights in his

beloved party.

But the old Socialist Party also gained the allegiance of millions of industrial workers, poor farmers, and immigrants. Debs won their ardor, and he earnestly sought to represent them. His personal devotion and solidarity with the most oppressed cannot be doubted.

Touring the Deep South at the height of Jim Crow, Debs refused to address segregated meetings. His portrait often hung prominently in the tenement apartments of Jewish workers. "Deps, Deps, they called him," one informant recalled of the Yiddish-speaking socialists. In industrial cities and coal patches, he reached immigrant workers who often knew little English but grasped his message nonetheless. After witnessing one such speech, an incredulous reporter asked how Polish workers could understand the speaker. An immigrant worker replied: "Debs talks to us with his hands, out of his heart, and we all understood everything he said."

Lenin, not known for exaggeration, called Debs "one of the most beloved leaders of the American proletariat." Trotsky, who, when he lived in New York in the first half of 1917, met and embraced Debs, called the older man a "sincere revolutionary" and wrote of the "quenchless inner flame of his socialist idealism."

Which brings us, improbably as it may seem, to Shawn Fain. The jarring shift of subjects conjures the images of a vast balloon suddenly losing its air—an involuntary descent from something lofty and noble, whatever its limitations, to the flatulence and squalor of the union apparatus.

To invoke Debs in honoring the UAW president is to invite a comparison that the award's sponsors would have done better to avoid. It's a good chance for a history lesson.

One hardly knows where to begin, but a few "trifling" differences spring to mind:

- Debs led the Pullman Strike of 1894, one of the greatest labor struggles in American history, which united rail workers across trades and the country against the corporations. Workers, he explained, had to be "united compactly within the one organization, so that at all times they can act together in the interests of all."

- Fain's sham "Stand Up Strike" in 2023 set out to divide workers. Even at its height, the UAW called out only about 45,000 of the roughly 146,000 union members employed by the Big Three, leaving the overwhelming majority on the job while the bureaucracy negotiated behind closed doors and the companies shifted production around. "We will not strike all our facilities at once," Fain said. "You will strike only if called by national leadership to do so. If your local has not called, you are to keep working."

- Debs walked away from a "comfortable office" and "large salary" as a union official because, as he put it, "my convictions would not allow it."

• Fain spent decades rising through the UAW apparatus before becoming its president three years ago, a post that will have paid him more than \$1 million by year's end.

• Debs told workers to quit "every capitalist party of every name whatsoever."

• Fain has spent his career in a bureaucracy that has funneled tens of millions of dollars into capitalist politics through PAC contributions, lobbying and other political spending since he joined the UAW International staff in 2012. In 2024, the UAW shelled out \$21.8 million in members' dues on "Political Activities and Lobbying" and Fain was a speaker on the first night of that year's Democratic Party National Convention calling the warmonger Kamala Harris a "defender of the working class."

• Debs opposed the conversion of industry to war and went to prison for opposing imperialist slaughter. "The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles," he said.

• Fain would beat the plowshares back into swords, calling for auto plants to be converted to military production in the name of an "arsenal of democracy"—even as democratic rights are being gutted and the framework of a presidential dictatorship erected.

• Debs opposed pitting workers of different countries against each other. "We have no enemies among the workers of other countries," Debs said. "The workers of all countries are our friends."

• Fain promotes Donald Trump's tariffs and an "America First" economic nationalism intended to shift production to the US at the expense of workers in other countries. "We're ready to work with Trump" on tariffs, declared the headline of an article Fain published in January, 2025.

• Defending immigrant workers, Debs declared "if Socialism, international, revolutionary Socialism, does not stand staunchly, unflinchingly, and uncompromisingly for the working class and for the exploited and oppressed masses of all lands, then it stands for none."

• Fain has proposed no industrial action to defend immigrant workers being seized by ICE Gestapo, or against the murder of ICE protesters, including union worker Alex Pretti on the streets of Minneapolis.

• Debs crusaded against the corruption of union bureaucrats whose "names are on the pay-roll and expense account." "When the working class unite," he predicted, "there will be a lot of jobless labor leaders."

• Fain, meanwhile, sits atop precisely such a payroll: a highly paid union apparatus still subject to federal monitorship after the UAW corruption scandal. The monitor's reports document evidence of Fain's threats and retaliation against rival officials. Serious interests are involved. The total payout to the paid staff of the UAW International apparatus at Solidarity House last year was \$107.1 million in salaries and expenses—the union's single largest expenditure. That went to a staff of roughly 950 apparatchiks, whose average compensation rose to \$112,000, well above the pay of the average shop-floor worker.

• Debs sought to overthrow capitalism and make industry "the common property of all, democratically administered in the interest of all." He rejected "a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence."

• Fain's program is to make American capitalism more competitive, to ensure the profits of the bosses, accepting the subordination of workers to speedup, production quotas and the evermore dangerous intensification of labor on the shop floor. The consequence is written in the growing toll of industrial injuries and deaths, including three workers killed at Stellantis plants covered by the UAW's vaunted 2023 contract.

• Debs sought to awaken rank-and-file workers to their own power. "As individual wage-slaves you are helpless," he explained. "As a class, you are the greatest power between the earth and the stars."

• Fain is running for reelection against rank-and-file and challenger Will Lehman. One of Fain's own lieutenant bureaucrats was sanctioned for threatening Lehman with assassination.

This last point is perhaps the most damning exposure of Fain's "award." Because there is, in fact, a candidate standing for UAW president who embodies the best of what Debs stood for. Like Debs, Will Lehman is fighting for socialist politics in the working class. Like Debs, Lehman has declared he will not rise from the ranks, but with them. Like Debs, Lehman is calling for rank-and-file power and the fighting unity of workers everywhere. Like Debs, Lehman opposes imperialist war.

The choice of Fain over everything Debs represented, therefore, cannot be chalked up to historical ignorance or bad judgment. It is a political decision enacted by definite interests. What is involved is the appropriation of Debs' name and moral authority by a privileged layer organically hostile to the independent industrial and political action of the working class.

The Debs Foundation is run by a volunteer board drawn heavily from the trade union officialdom, labor academia, and Democratic Party-aligned liberalism. Its president, Mark Dimondstein, retired last year after 12 years at the head of the American Postal Workers Union, during which time he himself collected more than \$2.1 million in salary, allowances and other disbursements from the union which he led to the precipice of destruction.

It is this social layer—not the rank-and-file workers to whom Debs devoted his life—that dares to determine who may inherit his name.

The fact that Fain has been handed a prize named after Debs becomes still less mysterious when one considers who else has won it over the years. The very first recipient, in 1965, was longtime United Mine Workers president and consummate union bureaucrat John L. Lewis, who knew Debs and who hated all that he stood for. There was not a more ferocious opponent of socialism in the labor movement, though it must be admitted, as opposed to Fain, that the old UMW head was compelled under rank-and-file pressure, on occasion, to lead a national strike and even oppose an American president, as when the coal miners went on strike in 1943 against the Roosevelt administration and at the height of World War II.

In fact, since its inception the Debs Award has gone overwhelmingly to figures drawn from the official trade union bureaucracy and the liberal-Democratic Party milieu. At least 26 of its 59 recipients have been senior union officials or union-affiliated organizations, including UAW presidents Walter Reuther and Ron Gettelfinger, AFL-CIO presidents John Sweeney and Richard Trumka, and the heads of the mine workers, machinists, steelworkers, communications workers, clothing workers and SEIU. The prize has also been bestowed on such representatives of Democratic Party liberalism as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Michael Harrington, Jesse Jackson, Julian Bond and Bernie Sanders.

It reads less like an honor roll of Debs' heirs than a roll call of just the sorts of figures he spent his life fighting.

Some monuments honor the dead. Others are meant to keep them down. The Debs Award aims for the latter. Each year another union official or Democrat is heaped on Debs' grave. Fain is the latest stone.

Debs' legacy does not belong to the union officialdom or its Democratic Party allies. It belongs to the workers who, like Debs, will fight to free themselves from capitalist politics, reject imperialist war and establish their independent power over industry and society. They will find their way to Debs, and to considerably more.



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