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USA

United Auto Workers Call for a General Strike and Endorse Biden

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV589 - February 2024 -

Publication date: Thursday 1 February 2024

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The United Auto Work union of today exemplifies labor’s problems and possibilities. Last week its president Shawn Fain both endorsed Democrat Joe Biden for president while also calling for a general strike.

In 2023, following indictment and conviction of the old UAW leadership for corruption, Shawn Fain and a group of reformers were elected to lead the union. Fain and his group then led the union in a remarkable national strike against all three big U.S. auto makers. As I wrote at the time:

The United Auto Workers carried out a 45-day strike against the Big Three U.S. auto companies—Ford, Stellantis, and General Motors—then negotiated a contract in October and won not only large wage increases and the elimination of tiers but also encroached on the corporations’ control over their plants and the industry. The United States has not seen a union lead a strike of industrial workers like this for decades.

Now Fain has called for a general strike by U.S. unions for May 2028. Speaking at the UAW national political conference he said, “We want a general strike. We want everybody walking out just like they do in other countries.” While there have been some big strike waves such as those of in 1919, the 1930s, 1946, and 1970, and a few industry-wide and city general strikes, there has never been a national general strike. To achieve such a strike, Fain has called upon unions to set their contract expiration dates for May 2028, as the UAW has.

Such a call will be difficult to achieve. The Taft-Hartley Law of 1947 outlawed sympathy strikes, solidarity strikes and general strikes, and since the 1970s and until the last few years, strikes in the United States have declined dramatically. Union leaders have been hesitant to challenge the status quo and workers so far have not had the consciousness, organization, and combativity to do so. Clearly Fain’s call for a strike four years from now is an attempt to get workers’ attention and to orient the working class to a policy of class struggle.

At the same time, Fain announced that the UAW, with almost one million members (400,000 active and 500,000 retired) will endorse Biden for president, calling his rival Donald Trump “a scab” opposed to “everything we stand for.” President Joe Biden had joined UAW workers on the picket line last year, a first for any U.S. president. Still, an internal UAW poll conducted last summer showed that 30% of members supported Biden, 30% backed Trump, and 40% were independent. In recent presidential elections about 60% voted Democratic. Fain’s announcement is meant to unify the members behind Biden.

Fain’s two announcements reveal labor’s possibilities and problems. On the one hand, there is now a small but significant part of the UAW and working class more generally prepared to engage in class struggle. But labor’s political direction is more problematic. The UAW endorsed Biden, the candidate of a capitalist party. Some UAW members objected to supporting Biden because of his support for Israel’s genocidal war on Palestine. A more significant number of UAW members support Trump with his racist, misogynist, pro-business, and authoritarian politics. And the working class itself has no independent political arm.

The United States has not had an important working-class party—labor, Socialist, or Communist—since the 1910s. And there hasn’t been much interest in creating one since the 1930s. While not on the agenda at the moment, the need for such a party of working people is clear, but it will have to be done by a fight against the labor bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. So, the obstacles are clear too.

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28 January 2024

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