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Biden endorsement raises question: Where is the UAW going?

By Martha Grevatt posted on January 29, 2024

The United Auto Workers union was among the first major unions to demand a permanent ceasefire in Palestine. This call, first announced by UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla on Dec. 1, was reiterated by union President Shawn Fain at a December 15 news conference. Fain emphasized peace and social justice when he spoke at the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Day march in Detroit a month later.



UAW Labor for Palestine members march for Palestine, Brooklyn, New York, Dec. 9, 2023. Credit: UAW Labor for Palestine

The UAW's position represented a break with the uncritically pro-Zionist stance of the Democratic Party establishment, the Biden administration and, historically, the AFL-CIO. Other national unions, representing millions of workers, followed suit. They include the Service Employees (SEIU) and Communications Workers (CWA).

However, the conduct of the UAW leadership on Jan. 24 could be seen as a negation of almost two months of progressive politics. During a closed meeting of the union's International Executive Board — the first IEB directly elected by the UAW membership — the board voted unanimously to endorse President Joe Biden for reelection in November.

The announcement was made at the annual conference of the Community Action Program (CAP), the UAW's political action committee. About 750 delegates, sent by local unions across the country, were gathered in



Washington, D.C. Yet none of the attendees, many of whom were wearing “Ceasefire now” stickers, had a say in the decision to endorse “Genocide Joe.”

In fact there was no effort whatsoever to democratically involve rank-and-file members in a discussion on the November election.

Previously, President Fain had said that politicians shouldn’t take the union’s support for granted — they would have to “earn it.” Fain gave a glowing endorsement of Biden, saying he had “earned it.” The message went far beyond anything along the lines of “Biden is bad but Trump is worse so we have to vote for Biden.”

Cops eject Palestine supporters

Despite voting in favor of the Biden endorsement, Director Mancilla was initially ordered to remove the pro-ceasefire stickers he was wearing. Although he refused, he was eventually allowed to sit in the front with the rest of the IEB.

When Biden addressed the CAP conference, three members, all representing UAW Local 2710, began chanting “Ceasefire now!” In what appeared to be an organized effort to drown them out, conference attendees counter-chanted “UAW.” Capitol police quickly moved to forcibly drag the protesters out of the hall, yanking a Palestinian flag from their hands.

No one was arrested, but the three CAP delegates who chanted were not allowed back in the conference.

For the UAW to allow the cops to intervene — violently suppressing dissent — is inexcusable. The “drown them out” tactic was reminiscent of how UAW conventions were run under the previous leadership. For over 70 years — before the rank and file won the right to elect the IEB directly — the “Administration Caucus” exercised almost total control over the convention process, encouraging booing and the use of noisemakers when its opponents had the floor.

Jan. 24 was a low point in the history of union reform efforts.

Biden no ‘friend of labor’

Fain, in his endorsement speech, echoed Biden’s own claim to be a “pro-labor” president. Yet this glosses over the maneuvers of Biden and former Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh to block a railroad strike in 2022. During the auto strike last year, Biden came to a UAW picket line — but he also called on the union and the auto companies to come up with a “win-win” resolution. Just what’s wrong with the workers being the winners and the companies having to share their profits as a result?

Early in Biden’s presidency he touted the “PRO Act” — Protecting the Right to Organize. The Act did in fact have many clauses that facilitated union organizing. But if the Senate couldn’t be moved to pass the PRO Act, Biden could have made it law by means of an executive order. He didn’t.

Fain cited Biden’s role as vice president during the 2009 bailout of General Motors and Chrysler (now part of Stellantis). True, some Republican politicians employed rhetoric that called for the collapse of the Detroit auto companies — which would have meant the loss of massive numbers of UAW jobs. But the actual bailout agreement that President Barack Obama’s Treasury Department came up with and that UAW members reluctantly accepted was essentially an attack on the union.

The companies used the bankruptcy process to squeeze major wage and benefit concessions from then-current and future workers. These concessions translated into the quarter-trillion dollars in profit GM, Ford and Stellantis n ▲

over the past decade, a figure often cited during last year's strike.

Class struggle unionism requires a world view

The UAW has undergone profound changes since 2021, when rank-and-file members voted in a referendum to change how the IEB is elected. Prior to the change to a "one member, one vote" system, the IEB was chosen by delegates in a tightly controlled convention. This paved the way for the defeat of a majority of Administration Caucus candidates in favor of the Members United slate, led by Shawn Fain.

UAW members have witnessed a revival of class struggle tactics in the tradition of the heroic sit-down strikes of the 1930s. After decades of concession bargaining and "labor-management cooperation," the union's "Stand Up Strike" against the Detroit auto companies won historic gains.

While these changes are significant, their impact is limited if the UAW does not act in concert with the global working class. At this moment, Palestine is the epicenter of the global class struggle. A letter signed by 30 Palestinian labor organizations has called on workers around the world to demonstrate solidarity by refusing to handle goods going to or coming from Israel.

U.S. unions, including the UAW, must honor this global picket line. That means breaking with Biden and the Democratic Party.

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