RANK-AND-FILE POWER, NOT UNION BUREAUCRACY: A STATEMENT TO UAW ACADEMIC WORKERS RETURNING TO CAMPUS



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There are roughly 100,000 academic workers in the United Auto Workers union, making up 25 percent of the UAW membership. These include graduate student workers, postdoctoral researchers, adjunct and non-tenure-track faculty and other academic workers at the University of California, Columbia, NYU, Harvard, MIT, Rutgers, University of Michigan and many other campuses.

Tens of thousands of UAW academic workers are now returning to campuses across the country. Over the past two years, graduate employees, academic workers, and the students they serve have been at the center of the opposition to the Gaza genocide and the attacks on immigrants and democratic rights. Academic workers have also been among the most combative sections of the UAW membership—striking, rejecting sellout contracts, and repeatedly colliding with a union apparatus that has worked to shut your struggles down and bolster the political establishment.

Most of you, if the last election is any guide, don't even know that a vote for UAW president and other top officers is now underway, or know much about Shawn Fain's record, let alone the other candidates. I am a Mack Trucks worker and socialist from Pennsylvania, and I am the only candidate who opposes the escalating world war and Trump's drive to establish a fascist dictatorship in this country. My program calls for abolishing the UAW bureaucracy and transferring power to the workers on the shopfloor, through rank-and-file committees that unite workers in the US with their brothers and sisters in Canada, Mexico and around the world.

Corporate politicians and media, along with the official "left" in academia, falsely portray the working class as too conservative to fight for revolutionary change. I know firsthand that workers are seething just as much over social inequality, endless wars, and the threat to democratic rights. That opposition has been bottled up by a union bureaucracy that systematically blocks workers from using their immense social power against the oligarchy that controls economic and political life.

Over the last several years, rank-and-file workers have repeatedly rejected UAW-backed sellout contracts and authorized strikes in near-unanimous votes. Fain's bogus "Stand Up" strike, which kept most workers on the job, has only meant more job cuts, exploitation and workplace deaths and injuries. In the factories, rank-and-file workers have nothing but scorn for Fain's empty rhetoric about fighting "corporate greed." They are searching for a way to fight and increasingly open to revolutionary ideas.

Socialism cannot be won by pressuring the Democratic Party or any other capitalist party. It is built by workers organizing independently and fighting for political power themselves, and that fight is exactly what this campaign is for.

What do academic workers confront? You are returning to a university system under siege: a combined assault on higher education by the Trump administration, with the collusion of the Democratic Party—rising tuition and living costs, gutted public funding, censored faculty, and suppressed protest rights. The universities open amid the ongoing war on Iran, the plunder of Venezuela's oil, the drive to recolonize Latin America, the trade war against Canada, Trump's demand for a $1.5 trillion military budget and a backdoor meeting between Trump's son-in-law and Democratic Party congressional leader Hakeem Jeffries over a bipartisan agreement on war and austerity after the midterm elections.

These are the roots of what you face: a stratified academic workforce, graduate employees relying on food pantries, and the relentless gigification of lecturer positions. These are products of a higher-education system, and a broader economy, organized to protect profit and fund war rather than meet social need.

My campaign fights for the unification of all academic workers—graduate employees, adjuncts, lecturers, postdocs—on a program of guaranteed living wages, full-time secure positions, and an end to the university's role as an enforcer of political repression. Academic workers joined the UAW to fight not only for better wages and conditions but for the broader issues of opposing war, defending free speech, and defending immigrants and international students. What has been the experience?

At Columbia University, the UAW bureaucracy—led by Democratic Socialists of America members like Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, who cut his teeth betraying the Harvard graduate workers' strike—has repeatedly worked to shut down the membership's strikes and to impose sellout contracts over the opposition of the rank and file. When Columbia student workers voted by over 90 percent to strike, the UAW threatened to withhold authorization unless the local watered down its demands. The same apparatus stood by while a UAW member, the Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil, was seized by ICE and threatened with deportation for opposing the Gaza genocide. And it was the UAW bureaucracy that seized on a court injunction as the excuse to shut down the University of California strike against the police repression of anti-genocide protesters.

Fain's apparatus has been complicit in this repression from the start. The UAW endorsed Biden, then campaigned for Harris, as they supplied the bombs to Israel and slandered the anti-genocide protests as antisemitic. The UAW stood by as its own members were dragged out of its political action conference that endorsed "Genocide Joe," with secret service agents shielding the president from the workers he was there to court. Fain, promoted by the DSA, has lined workers up behind Trump's trade war, dividing workers in the US, Mexico and Canada against one another, boasting during the July 30 debate that the UAW regularly works with Trump on tariffs.

Fain's rival Richard Boyer, meanwhile, complained that the UAW wasn't getting a good return on the money it spends to unionize academic workers—because, he explained, they graduate every few years and the union must keep recruiting new ones. The apparatus does not even pretend that you matter except as a source of dues.

All of this is the outcome of the pro-capitalist and nationalist politics of the union bureaucracy, and its political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party—the other party of the oligarchy.

The radicalization sweeping through the universities and the working class has so far found its initial expression in votes for DSA candidates. But the program of Mamdani and others like him is not socialism—it is working within the Democratic Party to tinker at the edges of capitalism while the war, the dictatorship and the plunder of the planet proceed. The Democrats paved the way for Trump, and they have since been his critical enforcers. They fear a movement from below by workers and young people far more than they fear a fascist dictatorship. Both parties of the oligarchy are united in the drive to war and in the suppression of the working class.

There is no socialism without the working class, without the fight for political power, and the expropriation of the oligarchs.

That is why academic workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. Your fight cannot be separated from that of autoworkers and other industrial workers—the same corporations and the same government stand against you both, and only our united strength can defeat them. I am calling on you to build rank-and-file committees in every university, factory and workplace. These committees—controlled by the workers themselves, not the union bureaucracy—must serve as defensive organizations, the center of an anti-bureaucratic revolt, and the embryo of the self-government the working class will need to take power.

Do not leave the conduct of your struggle in the hands of an apparatus that has sold you out at every turn. Build the rank-and-file committees, take control of your own fight, and vote for the only candidate who stands for workers' power, international unity, and socialism.

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