The Battle for the Soul of the UAW: Union Democracy and the Seductions of Power

written by Abe Walker | September 29, 2026

After years of struggling in relative obscurity, democratic socialists were jubilant to have elected one of their own to high-profile office. With bold rhetoric and meme-friendly soundbites, their candidate captured the hearts and minds of a working-class base eager for an alternative to the establishment's caustic brand of demagoguery. Ignoring calls for moderation, the campaign took on a defiant, openly confrontational tone. Its outcome shocked the old guard, upended the status quo, and served as a warning to entrenched interests everywhere.

The year was 2023, and Shawn Fain had just won the presidency of the United Auto Workers union. Fain quickly became the public face of a resurgent workers movement that seemed poised to usher in a new wave of labor militancy. But there would be little time for celebration once the weight of the task ahead set in. Indeed – like a certain big city mayor – Fain would quickly discover that his election fight was only a preview of the battles to come.

Fain is now standing for reelection, with ballots set to be tallied next month. Three years ago, few could imagine that Fain would face a viable challenger as he eyed a second term. Yet today, his star has long since dimmed, and his fate now hangs in balance. The upcoming vote will serve as a referendum on his tenure, and while he remains the clear favorite, there is considerably less enthusiasm behind his current bid.

Fain's dramatic rise and fall can only be understood in the context of the reform movement that propelled him to power. Fain traces his lineage to a long history of rank-and-file agitators who challenged the 74-year reign of the incumbent Administration Caucus from below. In the 1960s, the

Revolutionary Union Movement organized Black militants to combat the union's complicity in *de facto* factory segregation. In the 1980s, the New Directions caucus fought against the introduction of lean production and concessionary bargaining. These efforts scored some victories in local elections, but the possibility of taking power on a grand stage remained elusive. The established powers proved remarkably resilient, using their vast patronage network to absorb dissidents and marginalize challengers. Dissent was managed, co-opted, or crushed.

Meanwhile, union leaders embraced "jointness" and labor-management cooperation, seeking to align workers' interests with corporate competitiveness. A series of concessions in the 2000s culminated in two-tier contracts that subjected new hires to substandard wages and reduced benefits, creating artificial hierarchies that fractured shop-floor solidarity. Givebacks at Detroit automakers were compounded by organizing challenges in the South, where the union failed to make inroads at the German and Japanese plants that were overtaking the sector. As membership plummeted, union officials oversaw a managed decline, presiding over plant closures and outsourcing. Insulated from rank-and-file agitation and accountable to no one, it was a short step from sweetheart deals and graft to outright corruption. The breaking point arrived in the late 2010s with the exposure of a scandal involving the misuse of union funds for personal expenses, and officials accepting bribes from the very auto executives they were supposed to bargain against. Two former presidents were sent to prison, and a federal monitor was appointed to oversee the union's operations under a consent decree. But this legitimacy crisis came with a silver lining, shattering the old guard's aura of invincibility and creating an opening for change.

Amidst the wreckage, a coalition of frustrated auto workers founded Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD). Drawing tactical inspiration and support from broader labor-left networks, including Labor Notes and the Democratic Socialists of America, UAWD presented democracy as an antidote to corruption. Through painstaking grassroots organizing (and an assist from the federal Monitor), UAWD successfully forced a referendum on direct elections in 2021, which passed with 63% of the vote.

After breaking the old guard's monopoly on power, candidates had to tailor their messaging to appeal directly to the militant rank-and-file base. Shawn Fain ran on the strength of his populist, class-conscious rhetoric. He framed the election as an existential battle between the working class and the billionaire owners, while promising an end to concessionary bargaining and cozy labor-management partnerships.

Following a close run-off, Fain took the presidency, and UAWD also captured the Executive Board, winning all 6 of the seats it had contested (plus a UAWD-aligned independent). Before caucus supporters had time to catch their breath, its long-shot candidates were running the union. Fain immediately set about implementing his vision. Within months of his victory, he was leading workers in a historic strike against the Big Three that paralyzed the industry. Abandoning the union's decades-old tradition of pattern bargaining, Fain's Stand Up Strike kept the Big Three automakers perpetually off-balance with a targeted, escalating strategy. The resulting contracts yielded significant wage gains, eliminated lower-wage tiers, and granted the right to strike over plant closures. Fain started showing up everywhere, from the cover of *MotorTrend* to a featured

spot at the Democratic National Convention – and was even briefly floated as a vice-presidential candidate.

But even as Fain reveled in his newfound celebrity, the union's culture had begun to change in deeper ways. In a sign of democratic vibrancy, members were quick to note when the administration failed to deliver. Indeed, following the Stand-Up strike, several important plants rejected the contract, and it passed by a razor-thin, 56% margin at GM. Encouraged by the strike, newly emboldened workers at Mack Truck turned down a tentative contract agreement, vowing to fight for a better deal. By trumpeting democracy, Fain had inflated expectations and unleashed a movement that now exceeded his control. Having tasted real power, members were no longer content to settle for compromise.

Immediately on the heels of the strike, Fain announced "Stand-Up 2.0": a national campaign to organize multiple non-union auto plants across the country, including Japanese and European transplants as well as non-union electric-vehicle makers like Tesla and Rivian. Fain's chief of staff, Chris Brooks, had championed a mass organizing strategy rooted in high-profile actions. If the UAW could seize the momentum from the Stand-Up strike, he argued, it would produce a domino effect, rippling across job sites and jumpstarting a series of organizing drives in rapid succession. By organizing multiple employers simultaneously and linking their demands to the Big Three master agreement, the union aimed to take wages out of competition.

At first, the strategy seemed to work. Momentum from the strike carried into April 2024, when workers at Volkswagen's assembly plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, overwhelmingly voted to join the UAW, marking the first time a Southern transplant had been unionized via an NLRB election since the 1940s. Though UAWD had no organized presence in Chattanooga, workers consistently cited its influence as a source of inspiration and an indication of the union's forward trajectory. The UAW seemed unstoppable, and expectations were high that the union fever would continue to spread.

But this was to be the high-water mark of Fain's power. A subsequent organizing drive at Mercedes-Benz in Alabama ended in a humiliating defeat (albeit against stiffer odds). The UAW later won a narrow election at BlueOval SK – only for the company to announce the facility's closure and the termination of all 1,600 employees amid soft demand for EVs. Even at Volkswagen, winning the election was to be merely the preamble to a brutal, 500-day war of attrition at the bargaining table, during which management deployed classic delay tactics, stalling negotiations in a calculated effort to demoralize the newly minted members.

These organizing challenges mirrored problems within Fain's own administration. With its handpicked candidate now in the seat of power, UAWD was forced to navigate the inherent tension between the anti-establishment passions that fueled its rise and the solemn responsibility of managing a massive institution. Long consigned to outsider status, union reformers struggled to adapt to their new role. The surface-level consensus that had united the caucus against the corruption masked deep ideological and demographic fissures. The breaking point centered on the

issue of Palestinian liberation and the war in Gaza. A militant faction pushed UAWD to pass resolutions demanding that the UAW divest its assets from Israeli bonds. Moderates viewed these demands as "ultra-left" distractions that paralyzed the caucus in insular debates, alienated the manufacturing base, and derailed the practical work of building union power. Meetings devolved into an endless stream of performative parliamentary debates focused on ideological purity and caucus discipline. The internal culture became toxic, recruitment plummeted, and the UAWD's core manufacturing base began to disengage. By late 2025, the caucus could no longer function effectively, and UAWD split under the weight of deep ideological divisions. A majority of the steering committee voted to formally dissolve the caucus and to launch a new organization, UAW Member Action, even as a minority faction vowed to continue operating under the UAWD banner despite losing access to the group's digital infrastructure. When the dust settled, the reform movement was a shadow of its former self. The reconstituted UAWD had an explicit class-struggle orientation, but found itself relegated to the fringes. The larger Member Action tendency had broader support but effectively pledged its loyalty to the administration, ceasing to be a truly independent force.

This split coincided with a series of moves by Fain to consolidate his power and fortify his position ahead of the 2026 reelection cycle. Fain formed a "United UAW Slate," which critics viewed as a vehicle to mute the rank-and-file and insulate the leadership from accountability. Compounding the crisis, the Fain administration refused to release the official minutes of International Executive Board meetings throughout his tenure. But the most glaring sign of institutional creep emerged from a bombshell report issued in February 2026 by Neil Barofsky, the court-appointed federal Monitor overseeing the UAW. In early 2024, the IEB had voted to strip Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Mock of her primary responsibilities, citing financial improprieties. Mock immediately alleged retaliation, prompting Barofsky to investigate. The Monitor's report charged that Fain's Chief of Staff, Chris Brooks, and Communications Director, Jonah Furman, had conspired to oust Mock for insisting on enforcing financial safeguards. Fain countered that the Monitor had been motivated by animus over Fain's condemnation of the war on Gaza and early support for a ceasefire—a position championed by UAWD. The fallout was swift and humiliating for the reform administration: Furman was demoted and suspended, Brooks was forced to resign, and the union was ordered to reinstate Mock.

Accusations and recriminations abound, but Fain's lack of transparency has only given his opponents more ammunition. To critics, it appears as though the Fain administration has adopted the same mechanisms of opacity and retaliation it once condemned. While the details are still being sorted out, the irony is profound: the very federal Monitor who had paved the way for Fain's rise to power now threatens his legitimacy, highlighting the risks of government meddling in union affairs.

Desperate for a win to break the cycle of negative press, in February 2026 the UAW presented Volkswagen's tentative agreement to its members. The union had rejected a strikingly similar deal just months earlier, even calling a strike authorization vote to increase pressure on the firm. But workers were eager to consummate their election victory, and 500+ days of negotiations were beginning to test their patience. They ratified the contract by an overwhelming 96% margin.

A close analysis of the contract reveals both how much has been achieved and how much ground is left to cover. Under the terms of the deal, workers received a 20% wage increase over the four-year contract – a significant boost but still below the 24% increase achieved by Detroit automakers. Job security and layoff protections were mixed. Volkswagen committed not to close or liquidate the plant during the contract term, but allowed itself an escape clause for ”impossible conditions.” Scheduling PTO and dependent-care issues were another major priority, but again, the contract fell short. Healthcare costs failed to match the Big Three’s coveted no-premium, no-deductible plans–though premiums and deductibles dropped significantly. Whatever its achievements, the contract did not achieve full parity with the Big Three, diminishing but not ending the regional differential that has long served as a check on workers’ aspirations.

But perhaps the biggest disappointment was the contract’s expiration date. The union had wanted the contract to expire in May 2028 to align with the Big Three. Synchronization would enable coordinated action, up to and including an industry-wide strike, and help the union fulfill its promise to equalize wages and working conditions across the sector. But Volkswagen balked at this demand and agreed only to a 2030 expiration date, postponing the fight for full parity for at least another four years.

On the international front, Fain and company have seemingly retreated from the bold calls for cross-border solidarity that marked his administration’s early days. Fain surprised even his apologists by declaring he was “ready to work with Trump” just weeks after calling him a “scab,” and then offering a full-throated defense of Trump’s tariff regime. UAW members know the dangers of economic nationalism all too well, making Fain’s eager embrace of protectionist trade policy unsettling, to say the least.

How might the reform movement be assessed three years into Fain’s presidency? UAWD can take credit for setting in motion the chain of events that led to the first contract with a foreign automaker. UAWD-backed leaders achieved in a single year what the previous regime had failed to do over multiple decades. Still, when translating the bluster and swagger of campaign talking points into the unforgiving calculus of annual budgets and payroll ledgers, some degree of disappointment is perhaps inevitable. Operating in a climate of austerity while facing off against some of the world’s largest and wealthiest firms necessitates a certain pragmatism. Even the most naïve political operative knows better than to take campaign promises at face value. But the distance that remains between Volkswagen’s contract and that of the Big Three — and indeed, the gap between Fain’s boldest proclamations and his track record — suggests that democratic proceduralism must be accompanied by an unrelenting insistence on accountability. A vibrant reform movement is necessary to backstop the administration’s inevitable drift toward compromise.

The Fain administration’s efforts to consolidate its hold on power reveal the difficulty of sustaining a cohesive vision once the immediate enemy has been vanquished. Fain now finds himself grappling with the same oligarchic tendencies he was elected to eradicate. But those who accuse Fain and company of betrayal might be reminded that union democracy cannot rely on the benevolent intentions of elected leaders. Power, by its very nature, seeks to insulate itself from the chaotic demands of the rank-and-file. Will the rebel caucuses continue to assert their autonomy, or will they

be crushed in the name of a unity that erases difference, like so many Kronstadt sailors? It remains to be seen whether the loyalist Members Action tendency or the reconstituted UAWD will prove capable of holding Fain and company accountable. UAWD 2.0 has drawn some support – even achieving its long-awaited goal of Israeli divestment at the recent convention – but the defections were costly, and there are already signs that remnants of the old guard are mounting a comeback.

As labor historians have long noted, few rank-and-file caucuses survive the transition from the streets to the boardroom. History shows that insurgent groups often cannibalize themselves once their leaders take office, leaving the rank-and-file without an independent vehicle for accountability. To Fain's harshest critics, the incumbent administration now exhibits the very bureaucratic behaviors it was elected to dismantle. Yet ultimately, the future of the UAW does not rest on the shoulders of Shawn Fain, nor will it be secured by the opaque maneuverings of the International Executive Board in Solidarity House. It depends instead on continued pressure from an independent rank-and-file that forces the bureaucracy to perform.

Democracy is an inherently destabilizing, agonistic process. It requires a permanent state of tension: a mobilized, educated membership that unrelentingly demands transparency, contests elections, and resists the seductions of power.