

Labor Notes, DSA back sellout on US docks, keep quiet on union's support for Trump

Tom Hall
15 January 2025

Labor Notes and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have predictably backed last week's sellout deal to prevent a strike by 40,000 East and Gulf Coast dockworkers. Their endorsement of the betrayal by the International Longshoremen's Association is in keeping with the decades-long role of these pseudo-left organizations in upholding the authority of pro-capitalist union bureaucrats and of the corporate political parties over the working class.

A *Labor Notes* article reposted in *Jacobin*, the de-facto organ of the DSA, claims the contract "produced big wage gains and expanded protections in an industry where jobs are constantly under threat of automation."

"In the deal, the union holds on to existing contract language that protects against certain types of automation and has won guaranteed jobs where partial automation is put in place," Joe DeManuelle-Hall, a staff writer and organizer at *Labor Notes*, claims without substantiation. In fact, the details of the contract have not been made public by either the ILA or the US Maritime Association.

But there can be no doubt the deal is a sellout which paves the way for huge job losses. The information blackout surrounding the contract is standard practice to impose concessionary deals on workers. Similar methods were used to ram through deals at UPS and in the US auto industry, where thousands of cuts began only weeks after the deals were passed under false pretenses. In those contracts, the Teamsters and United Auto Workers bureaucracies used promises of modest wage increases, more than offset through planned layoffs, as an enticement.

Significantly, while the ILA has loudly trumpeted from the rooftops about the 62 percent wage increase under the new deal, which it earlier used to shut down a three-day strike in October, it has been silent on any concrete job protection measures.

But the worst and most dangerous part of the deal is the way in which it was produced through collaboration with the incoming Trump administration. In a statement, the ILA hailed Trump as "one of the best friends of working men and women in the United States."

This presentation of Trump is false to the core. The would-be dictator is preparing massive assaults on the working class from day one, beginning with mass deportations of immigrant workers, many of whom work on the docks. His government, directly staffed with billionaires such as Elon Musk, represents direct rule by the American oligarchy. Their aim is to drastically increase exploitation and discipline workers on the "home front" while they prepare for massive new wars abroad to conquer supply chains, markets and raw materials.

In short order, enormous class conflicts between workers and American capitalism will erupt and dominate political life under the Trump government. The union bureaucrats, on the other hand, are hailing Trump and pledging their cooperation. They not only aim to continue the close government ties they enjoyed under Biden and the Democrats, but are actively promoting his right-wing agenda.

The embrace of Trump, while a dangerous new development, stems

from the whole social outlook of the union bureaucracy. Since the 19th century, the bureaucracy's acceptance and defense of capitalism has led them to promote anti-immigrant racism, nationalism, anticommunism and war fever. They depend upon their close ties to management and government, and fear and hate the rank-and-file workers they claim to represent.

This underscores that the political struggle against fascism requires a rebellion against the union bureaucracy, through the building of rank-and-file committees to smash the power of the union officials and transfer power to workers themselves. This must be connected with a relentless struggle to expose the real class interests behind Trump's "America First" policies, counterposing to it a strategy based on the global unity of the working class.

Downplaying the bureaucracy's support for Trump

Instead, the pseudo-left is doing everything to downplay the unions' embrace of Trump and sow complacency and demoralization. *Labor Notes* does not even mention Trump except in a few paragraphs stuck into the middle of the article.

There, the *Labor Notes* writer blandly notes that "the father-son team of ILA president Harold Daggett and vice president Dennis Daggett met with US president-elect Donald Trump, who issued a statement of support in their fight against automation."

He continues: "Trump and a few other Republicans have been making overtures to some union leaders, painting themselves as protectors of the working class. After the meeting, VP (and heir apparent) Dennis Daggett lobbed back lavish praise for Trump.

"This week, the senior Daggett, in his first contract update in weeks—before announcing the terms of the agreement—released a statement calling the president-elect a hero: 'President Trump gets full credit for our successful tentative Master Contract agreement.'"

Then *Labor Notes* immediately moves on, as though the ILA president's praise of the fascist president was of no particular importance! On one level, to draw more attention to it would simply be a political embarrassment for them, since they devote all their efforts to promoting the dead-end of bureaucratic self-reform.

But the matter-of-fact presentation, in which the author does not attempt even to verbally distance himself from Trump, points to the fact that sections of *Labor Notes* and the DSA will adapt themselves to Trump if not fully embrace him. Significantly, *Labor Notes* also ignores the ILA's anticommunist statement from earlier this month, where Dennis Daggett defended the union's decision to continue moving military equipment during the three-day strike last October.

In the article's conclusion, *Labor Notes* admits that "the ILA does not

have a robust democratic culture.” This is putting it mildly. Union president Harold Daggett is believed to have ties to the Mafia, and runs the union as a family business. He makes nearly \$1 million a year out of workers’ dues while son Dennis makes around \$700,000.

But then, contradicting themselves, they claim the response by dockworkers to the deal has been “overwhelmingly positive,” even while admitting that “workers who spoke anonymously for fear of reprisal expressed frustration with the process.” This is nothing more than an attempt to offload responsibility for the contract from the ILA bureaucracy and their stenographers in *Labor Notes* onto workers themselves.

In opposition to the apologists for the trade union bureaucracy, the *World Socialist Web Site* tells workers the truth and is organizing rank-and-file opposition to defeat the sellout contract. This requires the transfer of power from the union apparatus to workers through the formation of rank-and-file committees to fight job cuts and exploitation.

Because the ILA bureaucracy “does not have a robust democratic culture,” *Labor Notes* implicitly argues, nothing can be done to defeat the sellout. This is a lie: it can and must be fought on the basis of self-organization of workers to countermand this betrayal and take control of the struggle by joining the growing network of rank-and-file committees under the direction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Labor Notes and its hostility to socialist politics

The article on the ILA contract expresses the whole politics of *Labor Notes*, the DSA and the pseudo-left in general, who uphold the union bureaucracy as the only “legitimate” leadership of the working class. *Labor Notes*, since its founding in 1976, has specialized in rejecting “politics”—by which they mean socialist politics—in favor of “union reform” projects consisting of replacing old corrupt union officials with new ones. At the same time, they adapted themselves and promoted the same pro-capitalist politics which transformed the bureaucracy into open agents of management.

These organizations are representative of layers of the upper middle class, not workers, and share the bureaucracy’s hatred and fear of the working class. They occupy increasingly responsible posts within both the union apparatus and the Democratic Party, providing both with “left” cover as they move more and more against workers.

Labor Notes is in the leadership of both the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers through the LN-sponsored Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) factions, where they are helping suppress opposition to mass layoffs and wage cutting.

A pattern is emerging where people endorsed by the DSA and *Labor Notes* quickly reveal themselves to be right-wingers. Last year, DSA-backed Chicago mayor Brandon Johnson spoke at the *Labor Notes* conference while Chicago-area police arrested anti-genocide protesters outside the venue. In the conference, UAW President Shawn Fain stumped for Biden’s war policies, declaring workers must become the “Arsenal of Democracy.”

US Senator John Fetterman (D-Pennsylvania), whom the DSA backed against extreme-right Republican candidate Dr. Oz, has embraced Trump, the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and is co-sponsoring anti-immigrant legislation with Republicans. The DSA’s members in Congress have voted repeatedly to fund war, and voted in late 2022 to ban a national railroad strike.

Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien has emerged as a major

backer of Trump. He spoke at the Republican National Convention and de-facto endorsed Trump in the election. In recent weeks, O’Brien has made the rounds on right-wing podcasts, denouncing immigrants who allegedly “come into this country with the agenda to commit crimes.” A recent post from the Teamsters’ official Teamsters X/Twitter account denounced immigration through the H-1B visa program, declaring “American workers must always come first.”

Jacobin called his election to the union’s top office in late 2021 “one of the most consequential events in recent years for shaping the future of the US labor movement” which promised “a more militant approach to building union power.” They justified their support for O’Brien on the most pragmatic and unprincipled grounds as “the best available option.”

While *Labor Notes* has issued the occasional face-saving criticism of O’Brien—entirely from the standpoint that he should have remained a supporter of the Democrats, the other corporate party—they give no accounting for how he endorsed the candidacy of a fascist and continue to sit in coalition with him on the Teamsters’ General Executive Board.

The pseudo-left will respond to Trump’s second term by opposing more vigorously a working class movement against capitalism. They will claim over and over again that supporting the Democratic Party—of which they are a part—is the only “realistic” alternative to fascism, even as Democrats abandon their token opposition to Trump and pledge bipartisanship for his social counter-revolution against the working class.

This is fully compatible with their adaptation to the extreme right. Even before the election, *Jacobin* called the Democrats’ occasional “messaging” about Trump’s threat to democracy, which it abandoned immediately following the vote, a “serious mistake.” *Jacobin* has also systematically downplayed the significance of Trump’s January 6, 2021 attempted coup d’état.

The working class must draw the lessons from this. The essential strategic question is the mobilization of the working class in the US and the world as the basic force against mass deportations, dictatorship and war. This must be based on a principled politics, not on short-term organizational objectives but on the revolutionary interests of the working class.

This requires a struggle against all tendencies which describe themselves as “left” but who reject and belittle the fight to free workers from the grip of the capitalist parties and pro-management bureaucrats. Such a bankrupt perspective only serves the interests of fascism.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)