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'We have a voice now': First UAW direct election will be in 2022

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The first direct election of international United Auto Workers officers will be held next summer or fall after the union's members chose to upend a decades-old system in a rebuke of the organization's leadership that has been plagued by corruption.

The unofficial, fully tabulated results of a referendum showed UAW members approved the new system with 63.7% support over the current delegate-based model. The election vendor received 140,586 ballots from the nearly 1 million active UAW members and retirees. Those results will need to be certified by the U.S. District Court.

The tally brings hope to some members who want to see greater transparency, accountability and responsiveness to the rank-and-file after 70 years of leadership dominated by the Reuther or Administrative Caucus within the union. Whether direct elections will lead to changes in the union's operations or of its 13-member governing executive board, however, remains to be seen.

"It shows that we have a voice now," said Meoshee Edwards, 49, of Harper Woods, who works at General Motors Co.'s Factory Zero Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant. "We get to pick and choose. It is time to clean up. No more of the favoritism. When we pick the person or persons, we have nobody to blame but ourselves. We get to hold those people accountable."

Implementing direct elections in the UAW was a movement long in the making, dating to at least the mid-1980s' New Directions grassroots efforts. But it was the consent decree brought on by years of corruption within the union that resulted in members opting to make the change and continue reform efforts already taken by UAW leadership to move past the scandals that involve 16 convictions, including prison sentences for two former UAW presidents.

"We'd been hearing that from the beginning of the case so many different people wanted this and felt it was the right option," said Matthew Schneider, former U.S. attorney who negotiated with the UAW on the consent decree requiring the secret-ballot referendum. "I have worked in a factory. I am not a unionized member. I thought, 'This is their union; they can decide.' ... I felt it really empowered them. The future was in their hands."

Now that members have made their decision, the UAW's court-appointed monitor, New York attorney Neil Barofsky, will submit a report on the election to the U.S. Labor Department's Office of Labor-Management Standards for approval. The federal court will then have to certify the results, a decision that any member can appeal within 30 days. If the election isn't certified, the referendum would have to be held again.

If it is certified, Barofsky will work with the UAW and members and examine similar models at the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the United Steelworkers to develop the rules of the UAW's direct elections and campaign finance regulations, which were key concerns among skeptics of the new model.

Delegates elected by local unions will vote on these constitutional amendments at the UAW's next constitutional convention July 25-29. The first direct election of the UAW's president, secretary-treasurer, three vice presidents and eight regional directors will happen next summer or fall.

Direct elections are not necessarily a panacea against corruption. After the Teamsters implemented direct elections, Ron Carey in 1991 was the first president elected by direct vote, but his re-election against James P. Hoffa was voided over a campaign finance violation. Hoffa remained president for 23 years until last year, when he retired, and Sean O'Brien — a candidate endorsed by the reform-focused rank-and-file movement Teamsters for a Democratic Union that originally had backed Carey — won.

"It takes a considerable amount of time and effort for a strong opposition to develop and project candidates that are capable of winning," said Marick Masters, a professor at Wayne State University's Mike Ilitch School of Business. "In the short term, you probably are going to see the candidates from the Administrative Caucus have the most support out of a wide range of candidates in most locals, comparatively speaking."

UAW President Ray Curry became the union's fourth president in three years after Rory Gamble retired June 30. A recent report from the monitor disclosed he remains under investigation by the UAW's independent ethics officer for possible ethical misconduct after accepting almost \$2,000 worth of tickets from a union vendor to watch the University ;

of Alabama play in the 2017 College Football Playoff National Championship game while he was director of UAW Region 8. The monitor didn't pursue actions against Curry, but Barofsky has 15 open investigations into others in the union.

The election will come ahead of crucial negotiations with the Detroit automakers starting in the summer of 2023. The companies will be expanding their lineups of electric vehicles that have fewer parts than gas- or diesel-powered vehicles, starting to operate new battery and EV parts plants owned by joint ventures, and bargaining with the companies at the same time as Canadian autoworker union Unifor for the first time in years.

"The empirical question is are they going to have a two-party system?" Masters said. "There could be a chaotic multi-party system in which you have to form a coalition of many different parts to govern. ... In the UAW's case, with that kind of friction, it would be more difficult to operate and bargain than it is now."

Too many parties vying for power is what led famed UAW President Walter Reuther to create the Reuther Caucus, which is now known as the Administrative Caucus, in the first place, Masters noted.

Even with the direct election getting a majority of support, about a third of members voted for the traditional system and there are hundreds of thousands more who didn't cast a ballot.

"That means that whoever ends up winning the direct election is going to have a lot of work to do to unite everybody behind him or her to rebuild the unity and therefore the bargaining power of the union," said Susan Schurman, a professor of labor studies and employment relations at Rutgers University.

The turnout means there is work to do to update contact lists to ensure members get their ballots in the future, said Scott Houldieson, chair of the Unite All Workers for Democracy, a pro-direct elections caucus that grew from grassroots movements within the UAW. The organization is shifting gears to focus on developing a platform and priorities based on discussions and surveys of members. It is looking to train reform-minded delegate candidates and likely support International Executive Board candidates in the next election.

"This is a big win for the membership of our union," Houldieson said. "Those leaders are going to have to take into account what the membership wants in contract negotiations. Hopefully, it will be a more transparent process. We are kept in the dark during contract negotiations, during strike actions. That is not the way to win those battles. The membership has to have information about what is going on, what is on the table to help them persevere

through this and actually win concession from the companies instead of the other way around."

The referendum outcome is the realization of a goal for long-time activists like Mike Cannon, a 51-year UAW member and a retired international union employee who's been advocating for "one member, one vote" since the New Directions movement with Jerry Tucker, the only UAW director who wasn't a part of the Reuther or Administrative Caucus since it was formed.

"It's a historic day in the history of the UAW," said Cannon, a UAWD steering committee member. "We're going to be organizing people around the issues that are important to them. That transcends any divisiveness that may exist currently, and will help propel us forward so that we can achieve our goals in terms of collective bargaining as well as the administration of the union.

"It will create that new, vibrant leadership that we need in the UAW, and with new ideas in terms of organizing auto plants and other workplaces. It just gives us a breath of fresh air that we sorely needed for decades."

The referendum results come amid an uprising in the labor movement, with workers demanding more from politicians, their employees and even their unions. A record 4.4 million U.S. workers quit their jobs in September, according to federal data. The Cornell ILR Labor Action Tracker has tallied more than 300 strikes so far this year. And in a movement dubbed "Striketober," some 100,000 workers walked out or came close to it in October.

The UAW earlier this year has had its own high-profile strikes with workers at Volvo Trucks North America rejecting multiple tentative agreements and John Deere employees turning down two tentative deals before approving contracts.

"This is not a monolithic win," said Andrew Bergman, a trustee of Local 5118 representing Harvard University graduate student workers who were on strike during negotiations last month. "It doesn't mean we will have new leadership, but now it opens up a space for deliberation. There wasn't one before.

"Over the last 72 hours, I've spoken with people who want different things, said Bergman, a UAWD steering committee member. We're not looking for the same vision, but a more democratic one."

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