WHAT AUTOWORKERS NEED TO WIN THE 2023 BIG THREE CONTRACT BATTLE



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To discuss joining the autoworkers rank-and-file committee network, fill out the form here. Sign up for text message updates on the Big Three contract fight by texting AUTO to (866) 847-1086. Statement reposted with permission from the World Socialist Web Site.

In a little over two months, on September 14, contracts covering 150,000 United Auto Workers members at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis will expire. For the first time in years, the contracts for another 20,000 autoworkers at the Big Three in Canada will expire at the same time, presenting an extraordinary opportunity for a powerful, internationally coordinated struggle.

To ensure this opportunity is seized and results in a clear victory for workers, we call for the formation of rank-and-file committees at every factory, warehouse and workplace.

An industry-wide network of such committees will provide the necessary organizational framework for a coordinated, unified fight by all workers for higher wages and decent working conditions and will prepare the ground for an international strike by Ford, GM and Stellantis workers across North America.

WHAT THE BATTLE LINES ARE HEADING INTO THE CONTRACT FIGHT

Workers are entering into a historic battle. All the auto corporations are in a furious competition to restructure their operations, slashing costs and shedding jobs, in order to dominate the markets and technologies for electric vehicles (EVs). The companies fully intend to fund the transition to EVs while maintaining their gargantuan profits by increasing workers' exploitation, whether by keeping wages below inflation, lengthening the workday, increasing production quotas or other means.

With the transition to EVs intersecting with a looming economic crisis and massive US spending on the military and war, the auto giants are preparing to carry out a jobs bloodbath worldwide of staggering dimensions, with hundreds of thousands or even millions of workers' livelihoods in jeopardy. Ford's CEO Jim Farley has stated that EVs will require 40 percent less labor to produce.

The companies are clearly preparing for a strike and attempting to intimidate workers. In a provocation, Stellantis has put a number of its factories into "critical plant status" for 90 days, starting July 5, meaning workers can be forced to work 12-hour days, seven days a week. The UAW apparatus is offering no serious opposition, allowing the company to stockpile inventory in advance of a walkout.

The conditions workers confront are already intolerable.

- Workers have suffered a huge decline in real wages and working conditions. Measly wage increases—if workers received raises at all—have been more than eaten up by the soaring cost of living, with food prices alone increasing more than 20 percent from 2018 to 2022. The eight-hour day has become all but a thing of the past, with more and more work schedules running 10 or 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week. At the same time, shifts are laid off with little warning, leading to a scramble to secure unemployment assistance, and temporary workers are left by the UAW to fend for themselves, with no protections at all.
- The frenzied chase for profits by the corporations has turned factories in the so-called richest countries in the world into sweatshops and death traps, in which workers are killed, maimed and sickened on a daily basis. In the three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, countless autoworkers have needlessly lost their lives due to the prioritization of profits over lives. Despite the pandemic falsely being declared "over" by the entire political establishment and the media, the virus continues to spread and evolve, leading workers to be infected again and again and increasing the likelihood of the debilitating effects of Long COVID.
- The global automakers are decimating workers' jobs internationally. Plants that once employed thousands just a few years ago—such as Stellantis Belvidere Assembly in Illinois and Ford Romeo Engine in Michigan—are no longer in operation, only the opening shots in the new corporate offensive against workers' jobs.

In recent weeks, Ford has announced hundreds of job cuts of salaried and contract workers in Australia, Canada and the US, expanding the wave of layoffs it has carried out in Germany, Spain, India and elsewhere over the past year. On June 28, Stellantis announced the closure of its motor plant in Vienna, Austria, laying off 300 workers, and has also been cutting hundreds or thousands of jobs this year in the US, Italy, and Slovakia. GM, meanwhile, is eliminating thousands of positions through buyouts.

Ford workers demonstrate after the announcement of the closure of the Saarlouis plant, June 22, 2022

Young workers can't afford to start a family or move out of their parents' homes. Retired workers can hardly afford to eat or pay the bills on their meager pensions, if they have them. More and more workers around the world are convinced that things can't go on as they are, and that something has to change.

In 2023, workers have repeatedly launched massive strikes involving hundreds of thousands or millions, from workers in France opposing President Macron's pension cuts, to train drivers in Germany, pilots in Spain, healthcare workers and educators in the UK, and public sector, port and freight car workers in Canada fighting rising food and energy costs. In the US, workers have repeatedly sought to fight back in recent years, from the struggle of 100,000 railroad workers in 2022, to the strikes by 50,000 academic workers in the UAW on the West Coast last fall, to the ongoing strikes of Pennsylvania locomotive workers and tens of thousands of film and television writers.

In each case, however, the chief obstacle facing workers in struggle are the entrenched trade union bureaucracies, which have systematically isolated and sabotaged strikes and enforced the demands of the companies and the state.

THE PRO-CORPORATE UAW BUREAUCRACY CONTINUES UNDER THE FAIN ADMINISTRATION

UAW President Shawn Fain and other members of the IEB

The massive decline in autoworkers' living standards —once among the highest of any industrial workers in the world—would not have been possible were it not for the collusion of the UAW bureaucracy. Over the last 40 years, the UAW executives have worked

with management to impose the tier system, eliminate COLA and pensions, lower our wages and destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The UAW machine, like Unifor's in Canada and the pro-corporate union apparatuses in other countries, is a "union" in name only. Rather than unite workers and fight for our interests, it isolates us and constantly works to enforce the company's wishes. A massive corruption scandal revealed that the union's top officials were accepting corporate bribes or embezzling workers' dues, and federal investigations into official misconduct remain ongoing, according to recent news reports.

The first 90 days of the administration of UAW President Shawn Fain and the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) caucus is an irrefutable demonstration that the problem was not a few "bad apples" in the union leadership. The issue is the massive union apparatus which is totally beholden to the corporations and unaccountable to rank-and-file workers.

Under Fain and the UAWD, the UAW bureaucracy betrayed the Clarios auto battery workers' strike, acting just as treacherously as it would have under former UAW presidents Ray Curry, Gary Jones or Dennis Williams. UAW Local 12, UAW Region 2B Director Dave Green, and the UAW International pushed a pro-company contract on workers which included just a 3 percent wage increase and introduced 12-hour days without overtime.

Clarios workers fought courageously, and twice rebelled against the UAW's agreements with management, voting to reject them first by 98 and then by 76 percent. Union officials responded to these overwhelming "no" votes not by listening to workers' demands, but rather by pulling out all the stops to break their struggle, terrified that workers' defiance would galvanize opposition and encourage independent action by workers. The UAW starved Clarios workers on just $500 a week in strike pay, kept them in the dark on their talks with management, only provided cherry-picked contract "highlights" before ratification votes, and virtually blacked out the strike to keep other UAW members uninformed.

If there were any lingering doubts about where Fain's administration stands, they should be dispelled once and for all by its decision to order UAW locals at the Big Three to continue handling scab-produced batteries from the Ohio Clarios plant, despite widespread support among workers for expanding the strike. A group of rank-and-file committees—at GM Flint and Lansing and Stellantis Warren Truck—fought against the bureaucracy collusion with the companies, repeatedly demanding that a ban be implemented on handling scab-made batteries.

The UAW's pro-corporate actions were by no means limited to just Clarios. In June, unprecedented wildfire smoke from Canada, driven by climate change, choked plants in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and other states with smothering haze. In some of the worst-affected factories, workers struggled to breathe, with reports of a number passing out on the lines. Fain and the UAW officialdom didn't utter so much as a word in workers' defense, allowing the companies to continue production under hazardous conditions.

Picketing Clarios battery workers

The strikebreaking actions of Fain's administration and the UAW bureaucracy at Clarios, and their silence during the wildfires, are a warning of what they are planning at the Big Three and other companies, such as parts makers and Mack Trucks, where contracts expire this year.

Posturing as militant critics of "corporate greed," the UAW headquarters has recently released statements and videos highlighting the Big Three's enormous profits, totaling a quarter of a trillion over the last decade. "Members were never made whole from the sacrifices we made in 2009," Fain states.

What hypocrisy! The brutal restructuring enacted in 2009 was carried out with the support of the UAW bureaucracy, including Fain himself. Fain endorsed

the 2009 contract as a member of the UAW-Chrysler National Bargaining Committee, saying at the time, "We're not happy about it, but you have to do what you have to do."

While rank-and-file workers have continued to see their incomes and working conditions worsen year after year since then, some "UAW members"—including Fain himself and hundreds of other UAW officials making six-figure salaries—have seen their wealth and stock portfolios swell, with no doubt not a few multi-millionaires at "Solidarity House." It is these social interests of the UAW bureaucracy which determine their hostility to any and all struggles of workers which threaten the companies' profits. The UAW apparatus is a tool and enforcer for management, not a representative of workers.

A PROGRAM TO MEET WORKERS' NEEDS

The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, bases its demands not on what the corporate executives claim they can afford, but on what workers need to have a dignified standard of living.

Therefore, we put forward the following list of demands as the necessary basis for any new agreements in the auto industry:

- Not a single layoff or plant closure! Developments in automation and technology must be deployed to shorten the workweek, not throw workers out of a job and increase profits. If EVs require fewer labor hours to build, then the workweek should be reduced from the exhausting 40, 50 and even 60 hours workers routinely labor to 30 hours a week with no loss in pay and the work divided among all workers.
- A 40 percent general wage increase and the restoration of COLA (cost-of-living) raises, to make up for years of wage freezes and the havoc caused by high inflation.
- An end to all tiers and "progression" wage schemes by immediately bringing up lower tiers to top pay and benefits.
- The transfer of all temporary and part-time workers to full-time status, with full pay and benefits.
- Full funding of pensions and high-quality healthcare for all current workers and retirees.
- The re-establishment of the eight-hour day with wages that allow us to provide for ourselves and our families.
- Rank-and-file control over line speed and production standards, to be negotiated by local rank-and-file committees, to ensure that workers' health and safety comes first.

The question workers face is not if but how these demands can be won.

The UAW bureaucracy is promoting illusions that corporate executives can be pressured to do the right thing, and that the profit interests of the companies can be reconciled with workers' interests.

At the same time, the union apparatus is attempting to shore up support for the Democratic Party and convince workers that this big business party can be trusted. The UAW's temporary withholding of official support for Biden's reelection is nothing more than an effort to make their inevitable endorsement appear to have been gained in exchange for phony commitments by the president to "stand with workers" in the transition to EVs.

Behind the scenes, the UAW apparatus is seeking state and corporate support to "organize" the new EV battery and assembly plants, hoping to bolster its dues revenue. Contrary to Fain's demagogic criticisms of the poverty wages of Ultium battery workers, the UAW apparatus is fully willing to oversee the proliferation of separate contracts and slashing of wages throughout the EV industry, as it has previously done at GM Subsystems and elsewhere.

Any strategy based on "pressuring" corporate management and their representatives in the Democratic and Republican Parties has again and again proved disastrous for the working class. It need only be recalled that the last devastating restructuring of the auto industry at workers' expense took place in 2009 under the Obama administration, with Biden as vice president.

Then as now, the companies, the White House and the UAW bureaucracy conspired to slash workers' wages, destroy thousands of jobs and close plants. This time, however, the stakes are even higher, as the Biden administration is seeking to use the union bureaucracies to discipline the working class, block strikes, and prevent a workers' movement from developing which would disrupt the war aims of Washington against Russia and China, which are threatening to escalate into a catastrophic new world war.

In the clearest indication yet of the intentions of the White House to impose the demands of the companies, the Biden administration has reportedly tapped Gene Sperling, a longtime top Democratic Party official, to coordinate its intervention in the Big Three contract talks. Sperling is a seasoned enemy of the working class, having served in Obama's auto industry task force that slashed all new hires' wages in half, as well as playing a key role in the enforced bankruptcy of Detroit in 2013.

Autoworkers will win this fight, not through appeals to company executives and big business politicians, but by means of hard and uncompromising class struggle. The allies of workers are not in the corporate boardrooms or the halls of Congress, but rather among the millions of workers across the US and in other countries who are similarly looking to fight corporate exploitation, including the 350,000 UPS workers whose contract expires at the end of July.

To ensure control of this struggle is in the hands of workers, we call for the following measures to be taken:

1. No more closed-door talks between UAW officials and the company! There is no reason to take on faith the "bargaining updates" doled out by the UAW's communications department. All contract talks must be livestreamed and placed under the oversight of workers chosen by the rank and file.
2. Any strike must be carried out across the entire Big Three. The notion of a "target company" in the contract talks is hopelessly obsolete, given the global character of the auto industry and the complex interconnections of supply chains. The isolation of a walkout to just one company—as during the 2019 GM strike—will inevitably weaken the position of workers and give the companies the upper hand.

We don't need the impotent "contract campaigns" being carried out by the UAW bureaucracy, which are entirely for show. It is long past time for a national and even international strike, involving our brothers and sisters in Canada, Mexico and beyond.

3. Strike pay must be raised to $1,000 a week. The UAW's strike fund, which stands at $825 million, has been used for decades by the bureaucracy as a slush fund for its own privileges. But the strike fund was built with our dues money and must be used to provide adequate resources for our struggles.

THE 2022 UAW ELECTIONS

Over the past two years, a series of rebellions by autoworkers have erupted. From Volvo Trucks, Dana Corp. and John Deere in 2021, to Ventra and Detroit Diesel in 2022, to Clarios in 2023, workers have again and again defiantly voted down UAW-endorsed contracts with management, often by 90 percent or more. In a number of cases, such as at Volvo, Dana, Deere and Clarios, rank-and-file committees formed by workers played the critical role in exposing the lies of management and the UAW bureaucracy and consolidating opposition to their conspiracies.

Will Lehman

In the UAW national elections last year, Will Lehman—a rank-and-file worker from Mack Trucks—fought to give voice and a conscious program to this developing rebellion.

Lehman, a socialist, ran for UAW president, calling for measures which would put all power and decision-making in the hands of workers on the shop floor and in other workplaces, including:

1. Not the reform of the existing bureaucracy, but its abolition.
2. An end to all UAW-corporate bodies, including the joint "training centers" that serve as nothing more than slush funds for the apparatus.
3. Full rank-and-file control over all UAW assets, along with bargaining and vote counting.
4. A program to fight for what workers need, not what the corporations say is acceptable.

Along with these demands, Lehman ran as a supporter of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), calling for workers to adopt an international perspective and strategy in opposition to the nationalism promoted by all sections of the UAW bureaucracy.

The UAW apparatus, along with the UAW monitor nominally tasked with overseeing it and rooting out corruption, responded by seeking to suppress participation in the union's first-ever national direct elections as much as possible. Turnout in the first round last fall was an abysmally low 9 percent—with only 104,776 ballots cast out of 1.1 million active and retired members—and was barely higher in the runoff. Tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of workers were simply never informed that there was an election or were not given a ballot.

The corporate law firms which comprise the "UAW monitor"—Jenner & Block and Crowell & Moring—worked to whitewash the bureaucracy's anti-democratic activities. As Lehman's campaign uncovered, the monitor's law firms were the site of brazen conflicts of interest: Jenner & Block has served as legal representatives for GM for decades, while Crowell & Moring has represented companies such as GM, Daimler, Caterpillar, Dana and others.

Fain was eventually sworn in as UAW president in March after winning just 3 percent of the votes of rank-and-file workers. Seeking to cover up the illegitimate basis of his presidency, Fain and UAWD have all but blacked out the evidence of systematic voter disenfranchisement in the elections, flying in the face of all their declarations to be restoring "democracy" and "transparency" in the union.

The Biden administration and the state, meanwhile, have worked to shore up support for Fain and present the UAW's fraudulent elections as legitimate. In late June, the Department of Labor rejected a complaint filed by Lehman, while providing no explanation for its denial or response to the evidence of voter suppression that Lehman had compiled. For the second time, Lehman has gone to court in defense of the rights of the rank and file, filing a lawsuit against the Labor Department, demanding a re-run of the elections in which all UAW members are provided adequate notice.

THE FIGHT FOR RANK-AND-FILE POWER AND INTERNATIONAL UNITY

The untapped social power of the working class is far greater than ever before in history. Corporate management and their political representatives are ruthless, yes, but they are also profoundly frightened of the growing possibility of an internationally coordinated strike wave and movement of the working class.

Since 2019 in particular, workers repeatedly sought to link up their struggles across borders in rebellion against the nationalist union bureaucracies. From the explosive series of wildcat strikes, eventually encompassing more than 70,000 auto parts workers, which erupted in Matamoros, Mexico, in January-February 2019; to the courageous refusal of workers at the Silao, Mexico, GM assembly complex to increase production and undercut the GM strike in the US; to the wildcat strikes in response to COVID-

19 shutting down auto plants in Italy, Spain, Canada and the US in March 2020; to the spontaneous job action of Volvo workers in Belgium in response to the 2021 Volvo Trucks strike.

The objective potential for workers to coordinate their struggles around the world is enormous. With the use of smartphones, social media, automatic translation tools and other technologies, workers are able to communicate instantaneously with their class brothers and sisters in virtually any other country. Worldwide, the working class is connected in a vast web of production, while facing similar problems and being exploited by the same handful of transnational companies.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting to provide the global organization for workers so they can harness their potential strength, break free of the stranglehold of the union bureaucracies and work out a common plan of action across plants, companies, industries and national borders. It is uniting not just autoworkers, but postal workers, educators, transit workers, rail workers and other sections of the working class, in a struggle against both inequality and imperialist war.

There is no time to lose. The companies and the union bureaucracies are already plotting how to defeat autoworkers in the coming battle. Workers must work out our own strategy and organization just as systematically and tirelessly.

Sign up today to become a delegate to the network of autoworkers rank-and-file committees and the IWA-RFC. We will break down the artificial barriers of race, nationality and other divisions imposed on workers by the corporations and the union bureaucracy and link up all those workers looking to fight for their common interests. We will assist you in building rank-and-file committees at your workplace and provide a means to communicate and share information with workers elsewhere.

The outcome of this struggle depends upon what workers decide to do. Make the decision to join the movement for rank-and-file power!

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR WORKERS' POWER!

Get involved with the rank-and-file campaign in the UAW elections.

willforuawpresident.org/get-involved