LETTER TO 2023 UAW BARGAINING CONVENTION: "THE RANK AND FILE CANNOT AFFORD TO WAIT"



BY WILL LEHMAN
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This letter is being distributed to delegates and workers at the UAW's Special Bargaining Convention in Detroit today. Download a printable copy here.

Delegates of UAW Bargaining Convention:

The Bargaining Committee meets amid the greatest cost-of-living crisis since the founding of the UAW in midst of the Great Depression. As a result of past sellout contracts agreed to by the UAW leadership, the membership is finding it impossible to keep up with rising prices. Inflation has destroyed all wage gains from past contracts and corporate profits are soaring.

The corporate media is hailing the election of the Members United slate as a break from the past. But for all Shawn Fain's talk about getting "tough" on the companies, his transition memo makes clear the leadership is preparing another sellout.

Warning that "unrealistic expectations can result in despair/anger," Fain's memo reads: "We can't do in six months what we could have done in a year. Expectations have to match reality and where we are. We can't set unreasonably high bargaining expectations based on enthusiasm for the slate and for reform. We need to say: we are here for the long game."

Mr. Fain, the rank and file does not have time for a "long game," we need gains and we need them now. A dozen eggs costs $5. Milk is $4 a gallon. The price of a loaf of bread has almost doubled. Bills for rent, electricity and gas are spiraling out of control. Retirees are watching the value of their pension payments dissolve into thin air. There are TPTs and second-tier autoworkers who are homeless. That's the reality we confront. That's why our expectations are as follows.

We, the rank-and-file membership, cannot afford to accept anything less than:

- 50 percent wage increase
- Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA)
- Immediate abolition of tiers
- Workers' control of line speed, safety and hiring/firing
- 30 hours work for 40 hours pay for all
- 50 percent increase in monthly pension payments for all retirees

Since the last contract in 2019, the rank and file has suffered through three years of a deadly pandemic, losing friends, relatives and coworkers while corporate profits skyrocketed. We are done accepting what the corporations say they want. It is time to fight for what the rank and file need.

Since the last contract expired, two past presidents of the UAW have been convicted of robbing our dues money and accepting bribes from the corporations. The rank and file are still suffering the consequences of this corruption, which was systematic and not relegated to a few "bad apples." It was a product of the rotten marriage of the UAW bureaucracy with the companies. The rank and file have not forgiven and we have not forgotten. We are still divided into tiers as a result of contracts agreed to through bribes. We never got our dues money back after paying it into what was a slush fund for wealthy bureaucrats.

A dozen other top leaders of the UAW went to jail before the federal government and courts intervened to stop additional prosecutions in exchange for a monitorship and a chance for a direct election. The UAW, Judge David Lawson and the federal government intended to use the election to provide legitimacy to the UAW bureaucracy without giving the rank and file a real chance to kick them out.

But only 9 percent of the membership voted in what was the lowest election turnout of any national union officers' election in the history of the United States. It was overseen by a "monitor" comprised of law firms on the pay of General Motors, just like the judge who issued the injunction against the 1936-37 sit-down strikers in Flint. The leadership that has emerged from this election is seen in the eyes of the rank and file as totally illegitimate.

Every day, more and more workers learn that there was an election in which they were denied the right to vote. The locals did not update the Local Union Information System (LUIS) and as a result, hundreds of thousands of workers never received a ballot. Even Ray Curry, in a last-ditch effort to cling to power, admitted that the election disenfranchised masses of workers and was effectively a fraud.

To be clear: the rank and file aren't asking that conditions change, we are demanding it. We, the rank and file, will not accept any attempt to pit us against each other based on country, company, age, seniority, race, or any other artificial division. This is what we want, and we will fight for it.

Will Lehman

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