

# Elon Musk challenges UAW to unionize Tesla

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On March 3, Tesla CEO Elon Musk released a series of taunting tweets challenging the United Auto Workers (UAW) to unionize the Tesla plant located in Fremont, California. Musk's remarks came after President Biden snubbed Tesla during his March 1 State of the Union address while praising GM and Ford for their investments in electric vehicle production and creating thousands of "Made in America" jobs.

The Detroit automakers have long collaborated with the UAW, while Tesla has resisted unionization. In his stalled "Build Back Better" proposal, the president has incorporated a \$4,500 electric vehicle tax credit for cars built using materials produced in the US and assembled by unionized workers. Musk has publicly denounced Biden's unionization requirement.

Musk, one of the wealthiest people in the world, started his March 3 tweet by absurdly suggesting that Tesla workers were happy with their wages and conditions. "Our real challenge is [the] Bay Area has negative unemployment, so if we don't treat and compensate our (awesome) people well, they have many other offers and will just leave! I'd like hereby to invite UAW to hold a union vote at their convenience. Tesla will do nothing to stop them."

To further goad the UAW, Musk shared a 2010 video from the *World Socialist Web Site's* YouTube channel of autoworkers at the NUMMI plant denouncing the UAW for selling them out. The New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. (NUMMI) plant—a joint venture between General Motors and Toyota—closed in 2010 without the slightest opposition by the UAW, leaving 4,700 workers with nothing more than meager severance packages. Tesla bought the plant later that year and with financing and assistance from Toyota converted it into the fledgling company's first electric vehicle factory. The Fremont plant now employs 10,000 hourly workers.

The WSWS video was taken at a meeting of UAW Local 2240 to discuss the closing of the plant and the severance packages. When rank-and-file autoworkers, who had been kept in the dark about negotiations between the union and management, insisted on their right to speak, UAW officials cursed them out and called the police.

In other words, the anger of workers was directed at the UAW because it sold them out to corporate management. This was the culmination of decades of "labor-management partnership" showcased at the NUMMI plant, which included the gutting of seniority rights, job classifications and other

shopfloor protections in the name of "ending adversarial relations" and boosting productivity and profits.

Musk is attempting to capitalize on workers' hostility to the pro-corporate unions to promote his own right-wing and libertarian business model, which is based on paternalism and virulent hostility to workers organizing themselves to oppose capitalist exploitation. Like fellow billionaire Jeff Bezos, Musk believes his operations can run smoother without having to employ unions to keep workers in line. This is especially true given the fact that the UAW is doing a poor job of suppressing opposition to corporate management, as seen in the wave of rank-and-file revolts over the last several years, including most recently at Volvo Trucks, Dana Inc. and John Deere.

In 2016, UAW President Dennis Williams—who was later jailed as part of prosecution of a dozen UAW International officials and relatives who took company bribes or participated in other union corruption—met with Musk and praised him for being a "very unique individual." Williams said the UAW was attempting to unionize Tesla but was "not approaching this in an adversarial way." In other words, the UAW offered Tesla a sweetheart contract to keep labor costs "competitive" in exchange for neutrality during a union recognition vote. Such deals, worked out behind the backs of workers, have been the modus operandi of the UAW "organizing" drives at Freightliner, VW and many other corporations.

Musk rejected the UAW's appeal and utilized anti-democratic and illegal tactics to keep it out. In 2018, Musk tweeted that his employees would lose their stock options if they voted for a union. The company has also prohibited workers from distributing pro-union literature in the parking lot outside of work hours and allegedly fired workers involved in unionization efforts.

As part of the Biden administration's efforts to promote the unions, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled last year that the Tesla was in violation of the law due to Musk's threatening tweets and efforts to discipline workers involved in unionizing campaigns.

In taunting the UAW, Musk likely believes a unionization campaign by the UAW would end up no more successful than the staggering defeat last year of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. Even if the UAW managed to squeak by and win a union recognition vote, Musk knows he can do

business with them. The German autoworker union IG Metall is similarly seeking to organize nearly 12,000 workers at a new Berlin factory, which has not started production yet.

The UAW poses no threat to Musk's profit interests. After spending decades collaborating with the auto bosses in the destruction of workers' jobs, working conditions and living standards, the UAW has already given GM and Ford the green light to create a new tier of workers, making substantially lower wages and benefits, at electric vehicle and supplier plants.

Biden, who regularly touts himself as the "most pro-union president" in US history, is seeking to fully integrate the unions into his corporatist and nationalist strategy against China. In a February 22 virtual meeting with union, business and military leaders, Biden said securing strategic raw materials was key to "national security" and challenging China's domination over electric vehicle battery production.

During that meeting, Biden praised the United Steelworkers union for its agreement with Talon Metal Corporation to jointly "train" workers to mine nickel in northern Minnesota and provide Tesla with a six-year supply of the critical metal for electric battery production. In exchange for a sweetheart labor deal, Talon agreed to neutrality in any union organizing campaign.

At the same time, Biden made it clear to USW President Tom Conway that he would not accept a national strike by 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers as the administration ramps up domestic production in conjunction with its further escalation of military conflict with Russia.

Having relied on the unions to enforce his back-to-work policy during the pandemic, the president is looking to use the unions again as a labor police force to suppress strikes and internal dissent over the unnecessary deaths of nearly a million COVID-19 victims, runaway inflation and the demands for endless "sacrifice" needed to mobilize the US for further economic and military confrontations.

While the corporatist unions offer workers no way forward, Tesla workers certainly need to organize to assert their interests. Musk has attained his vast personal fortune through enforcing extreme exploitation and unsafe conditions at Tesla.

In 2018, the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health (COSH) listed Tesla and Amazon as some of the most unsafe places to work. In a report from National COSH, severe injuries at the plant were almost a daily occurrence, and recordable injuries at Tesla were 31 percent higher than the rest of the auto industry between 2015 and 2016.

Last February, California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a lawsuit against the company for "rampant racism," based on allegations from African American employees at the Fremont plant who said they were the targets of regular racist slurs and were often assigned the most physically demanding jobs.

In May 2020, Musk ordered the restarting of production at the Fremont factory in direct violation of a county public health

order due to COVID-19. When Tesla workers protested the unsafe reopening, the company fired several workers for not returning to work. The Alameda County Department of Public Health, which capitulated to Musk, later reported that between May and December 2020 roughly 440 workers at the Fremont plant were infected with COVID-19. Musk was never punished for this illegal act and instead was rewarded by the market becoming the richest man in the world in 2020 with a net worth of \$189 billion. According to *Forbes*, he is now the second richest man, with a net worth over \$229 billion.

Workers, who are looking for a way to fight against Tesla, should draw the lessons of these struggles and join the growing network of workers who have formed rank-and-file factory and workplace committees. These committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves, have provided workers with the information and leadership they need to mobilize throughout their industries and beyond to fight the gang-up of capitalist politicians, giant multinational corporations and their bought-and-paid-for unions.

These committees are based on the methods of the class struggle, not class collaboration, and fight for the demands that workers' need, not what the corporate and union executives claim is affordable. These include substantial wage increases and Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA) to protect workers against the ravages of inflation, the restoration of the eight-hour day, fully paid health care and pensions, and workers' control over the speed of production and health and safety.

The development of electric vehicles and other new technologies is being used to restructure the global auto industry and carry out an international attack on workers. That is why rank-and-file committees reject the nationalism of the UAW and other unions and fight for the international unity of the working class against austerity and war. The development of such committees is part of the process of building a powerful counteroffensive of the global working class against capitalism, and for the seizure of the ill-gotten gains of oligarchs like Musk and Bezos and the socialist reorganization of global economy based on production for human need, not private profit.

The WSWS encourages Tesla workers to contact us for help in establishing a rank-and-file factory committee at their plant.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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