

At UAW town hall, Fain & Co. falsely claim “transparency” while blacking out Clarios strike

Marcus Day
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On May 31, the United Auto Workers International held an online “town hall,” which it dubbed in a press release the first such “union wide” meeting, headlining it as “Back in the Fight: Our Generation’s Defining Moment at the Big Three.” A more honest title would have been “Controlling the Narrative.”

The tightly scripted, 25-minute event was aimed at projecting an air of “transparency” and militancy on the part of the UAW’s new top leadership, while they in fact prepare to carry out the same policies as their predecessors: brutal attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions at the behest of the auto companies.

Contrary to the claims that the town hall represented a step towards democracy, the meeting was designed to exclude as much as possible the participation of rank-and-file workers. Comments on the UAW’s YouTube stream were disabled, and questions from UAW members could only be submitted in advance, with only five carefully selected to respond to. The “town hall” event itself was a face-lifting measure voted in under former UAW President Ray Curry and the Administration Caucus at the 2022 UAW Constitutional Convention.

The UAW’s new top leadership—President Shawn Fain, Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Mock, and Vice Presidents Chuck Browning, Rich Boyer and Mike Booth—all sought to present themselves as leading a fight against concessions, the tier system and job cuts. Fain, Mock, Boyer and Booth were all members of the Members United/United All Workers for Democracy “reform” slate in last year’s elections, while Browning, a key player in the sellout of the 2021 Deere strike, is a holdover from the UAW’s former ruling Administration Caucus.

“The goal of tonight is to get everyone on the same page about two things,” Fain stated. “First, we’re going into bargaining with clear priorities. We must fight to end tiers, we must fight to reinstate cost of living, and we must fight for stronger job protections. And we will not accept any concessions. Second, these companies have been extraordinarily profitable. And our members have created incredible value for these companies during some really hard and dangerous years. They can afford our demands, and we expect them to pony up.”

Seeking to burnish his image as carrying out a fight to defend jobs, Fain referred to Master Lock’s recently announced decision to close its Milwaukee, Wisconsin, plant, eliminating the jobs of over 360 UAW members, which he attributed to “one simple thing, greed.” Fain offered absolutely no proposals to fight the job cuts or mobilize other UAW members in support, instead saying lamely, “I just want to ask you all to keep them in your thoughts.”

In an unintentional yet significant admission of the illegitimacy of his new administration, Fain later said in response to a question about

transparency that “it’s important as members that you update your email addresses, your phone numbers, just so we can have better dialogue.”

Fain’s comments were a further confirmation of the fraudulent character of the 2022 UAW national elections, which saw an abysmally low turnout of just 9 percent in the first round, and less than 13 percent in the second round. Large numbers of workers were never provided adequate notice of the elections or received a ballot because the UAW apparatus deliberately refused to update workers’ contact information in its member database, as documented in an official challenge to the election results filed by Will Lehman, a rank-and-file worker and candidate for UAW president.

Silence on the UAW’s record of collusion with the companies

Other speakers feigned outrage at the deterioration of workers’ living standards. Referring to the wage and benefit tier system and use of highly exploited temporary workers, Boyer stated, “We need to fight to end the second-class status of workers who are being denied retiree health care and pensions. We need to fight to end the practice of using lower paid temporary workers for years on end and abuse of LLCs or joint ventures to lower our standards.”

Browning noted, “Like so many other important gains we made in bargaining over the decades, we lost COLA [cost-of-living raises] in 2009 as a result of the auto bankruptcies during the Great Recession. I don’t have to tell you how much inflation is once again hammering us; you’re living it every day.”

Pointing to the wave of factory shutdowns and job cuts, Booth said, “I don’t have to tell you we’ve seen a number of gut-wrenching plant closures over the last years. There’s Ford’s Romeo engine plant in Michigan, GM Lordstown assembly plant in Ohio, and the Stellantis Belvedere assembly plant in Illinois. And that’s just to name a few.”

While acknowledging these enormous setbacks for workers, none of the UAW officials offered an explanation of how they were allowed to happen, who was responsible and what their own role was, since any objective examination of the past 40 years would show that the union apparatus has colluded with corporate management in decimating workers’ jobs and wages.

In the clearest indication that nothing in the UAW bureaucracy has fundamentally changed under the new administration, none of the

assembled officials at the town hall mentioned the month-long strike by 525 Clarios battery workers in Holland, Ohio, nor the strike by 160 Constellium workers in Michigan, maintaining the UAW's near-total information blackout on the walkouts. The silence was by no means accidental, with Boyer, the vice president in charge of the parts sector, pontificating about the importance of workers in the supplier industries, yet saying nothing about the major strikes parts workers are engaged in.

The struggle at Clarios has quickly disproved all the pretensions of the new UAW administration to be fighting for "democracy" and representing a break with the discredited, pro-corporate Administration Caucus which preceded them.

The UAW apparatus under President Shawn Fain has negotiated two sellout contracts at Clarios overwhelmingly rejected by workers in two votes in recent weeks, first by 98 percent, and then by 76 percent. The deals—which included an insulting 3 percent raise and opened the door to 12-hour days on straight time—were backed by UAW negotiators, including newly elected Region 2B Director Dave Green, who is overseeing the contract talks.

Demonstrating that all the talk by the new UAW leadership about "transparency" is lying rhetoric, workers at Clarios have been subjected to the same underhanded, antidemocratic tactics that many autoworkers will be familiar with. Clarios workers have been kept in the dark on the content of the contract talks, and Local 12 has repeatedly forced workers to vote within hours of receiving just a few pages of selective contract "highlights," not the full terms of the deal.

Terrified that the rebellion of Clarios workers will spark a broader movement of rank-and-file autoworkers, Fain and the UAW International are deliberately isolating the strike and opposing the increasing demands by GM, Ford and Stellantis workers to impose a UAW ban on handling scab Clarios batteries. Significantly, Fain and others refused to address a question submitted by Will Lehman asking why the UAW was allowing the Big Three automakers to use batteries built by strikebreakers at the Ohio Clarios plant.

A reactionary program of economic nationalism

Well aware of the explosive anger among autoworkers over skyrocketing inequality, the assembled officials felt compelled to present themselves as critics of obscene corporate profits and "the billionaire class," a populist feint likely scripted by the UAW's new communications director, Jonah Furman, a former staffer for Bernie Sanders and member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

At the same time, the speakers promoted a reactionary economic nationalist perspective, presenting American autoworkers as uniquely exploited by the companies in an attempt to separate them from their class brothers and sisters in other countries.

"We know these companies are profitable," Boyer stated. "But why is that? The reason is because the US consumers buy big vehicles and the most profitable, big vehicles are made by UAW members...These companies may operate globally, but the UAW plants are where they drive up the profit margins."

These arguments are both absurd and false to the core. Any given vehicle is the product of a vast and complex international division of labor among workers, from the mining and refinement of raw materials, to the transport of supplies, the manufacture of components,

to their final assembly. The profits of the auto corporations are ultimately derived from the exploitation of the labor of workers all over the world.

Moreover, the right of workers to a good job and decent standard of living exists regardless of whether or not they produce "the most profitable, big vehicles." Boyer's argument, taken to its logical conclusion, would mean that workers who produce poorly selling, low-margin vehicles deserve the chopping block—which is in fact the viewpoint of management.

The promotion of an economic nationalist perspective by the new UAW regime is fully in line with the strategy of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, which is seeking to more closely integrate the union bureaucracies as US imperialism prepares for war with China. At the same time, it is looking to the supposedly "reformed" UAW bureaucracy to shore up flagging support for the Democratic Party among its members, a task Fain and his lieutenants will dutifully carry out.

"Corporate America and the billionaire class have made a killing over the last decade," Fain later said in the town hall, "while the working class has struggled to get by, that ends here and now. And we need to let everyone know, from the White House to the statehouse, to our local labor council, that if you stand with us, we will stand with you."

Economic nationalism, as well as anti-Chinese chauvinism, were also starkly on display during Fain's participation in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference held in Detroit in late May. In a panel discussion at the event with US Trade Representative Katherine Tai, Fain sought to blame poor trade policies—not capitalism—for the decline of workers' living standards, an argument that would find little objection from Trump and the ultra-right. Similarly, Fain decried China "flooding our markets with products," a frequent trope uttered by fascists such as Steve Bannon.

Such nationalist poison explodes all the attempts of pseudo-left groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America or *Labor Notes* to present the new UAW administration as pro-worker, progressive or left-wing. Behind their rhetoric, Fain and the giant apparatus he heads are preparing to impose massive new job cuts and concessions on behalf of the corporations, as the US ruling class demands workers make ever-greater sacrifices to fund war against Russia and preparations for war against China.

Workers, however, are already organizing to fight back on the basis of an entirely different perspective and program. Workers from a growing number of auto companies, including the Big Three automakers, Dana, Clarios and elsewhere, have been building a network of rank-and-file committees as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is fighting to unite workers and prepare a global counteroffensive by the working class.



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