

UAW organizes publicity stunts as “negotiations” with automakers start

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12 July 2023

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According to the Oxford Dictionary, the definition of a “con man” is a “man who cheats or tricks someone by gaining their trust and persuading them to believe something that is not true.” Shawn Fain, the new president of the United Auto Workers, fits that description perfectly.

After more than four decades of colluding with the auto companies in the destruction of jobs, living standards and working conditions of autoworkers, Fain is trying to peddle the lie that the UAW bureaucracy is preparing a monumental battle against the auto corporations.

Aware that the photos of bought-off UAW officials reaching across the table to shake the hands or even embrace corporate executives during the opening of official negotiations in the past have only inflamed rank-and-file workers, the UAW announced this week there would be no traditional handshake ceremonies. In a Facebook Live event Tuesday, Fain said, “Tomorrow, we are kicking off negotiations in a whole new way. In a break with tradition, there won’t be no public handshake ceremonies with the companies. I’m not shaking hands with any CEO until they do right with our members, and we fix the broken status quo with the Big Three. The members have to come first.”

This is all theatre. What do the auto bosses care about shaking Fain’s hands when they know he is kissing their behinds?

Instead of shaking hands with the corporate executives, Fain declared he and UAW vice presidents would be going to factories in Michigan this week to talk to members and “take your message straight to the bargaining table.”

On Wednesday, the union president joined dozens of International, regional and local UAW officials for photo-ops at the Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant and other Detroit area factories. While there is a militant and broad sentiment for a strike in September, autoworkers were largely indifferent to crowd of UAW bureaucrats who had gathered at their plant gates to talk to each other. Commenting on the presence of so many union officials, one SHAP worker told the WSWs, “When you look for the UAW stewards in the plant, you can never find one.”

The Facebook Live event was full of more bombastic declarations and hot air from Fain, carefully scripted by the UAW’s new communications staff, declaring the UAW leadership is “back in the fight” and making various hypocritical criticisms about the companies’ large profits—which Fain himself has defended over his

long career working his way up the UAW bureaucracy’s ladder. In 2009, Fain supported the brutal concessions contract at Chrysler, which slashed the wages of new hires in half, while he was on the UAW-Chrysler Bargaining Committee.

As the WSWs has explained, the elevation of Fain and the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) caucus to the top of the bureaucracy is “not the expression of a rank-and-file revolt against the apparatus. Rather, he is the defensive reaction of the apparatus and the ruling class to a growing movement from below.” Fearing the blatant corruption and pro-management policies of the old “Administration Caucus” had dangerously eroded the stability of the UAW bureaucracy, the ruling class has promoted Fain & Co. to provide a fake “reform” facelift to the apparatus as it heads into the most consequential restructuring of the auto industry in generations.

Significantly, during the Facebook event Fain said that the UAW is asking workers to fill out their phone number and email address on “strike support cards,” and that the UAW is “collecting these cards to make sure we can keep all of you informed with bargaining updates and calls to action.”

Fain’s comments were an unintended admission of what Will Lehman, a rank-and-file worker and socialist candidate for UAW president last year, has repeatedly argued: that the UAW elections were fraudulent and fundamentally tainted by widespread disenfranchisement, and that the union apparatus deliberately failed to update its LUIS membership database with workers’ contact information and provide adequate notice of the elections.

In a lawsuit filed on July 3 against the Biden administration’s Department of Labor, Lehman demanded a re-run of the elections, writing, “To this day, many members are unaware that there was an election in which they had the right to vote. Out of 1.1 million eligible voters, only 104,776 cast ballots while roughly 1,000,000 did not. This turnout—9 percent—is the lowest turnout of any national union election in U.S. history.”

During Tuesday’s Facebook Live event, Fain also repeatedly dodged questions from workers demanding an industry-wide strike by all 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers when contracts expire on September 14. He claimed that the “target company” was “the Big Three” and said it was up to the companies to decide whether there would be a strike or not. While declaring “our demands are clear,” Fain and the UAW officialdom have released no concrete list of demands—because they have none.

What is about to begin are not “negotiations” in any real meaning of the term, in the sense of a struggle between two conflicting parties. Instead, it is a conspiracy between the UAW apparatus, the auto executives, and the Biden administration. All agree that workers must

bear the full cost of the conversion to electric vehicle production while maintaining the companies' immense profits.

Fain and other UAW executives have already met with the auto CEOs behind closed doors and worked out the parameters of the next contract. The corporations want to finance the transition to electric vehicles by slashing tens of thousands of jobs, squeezing more profits out of the existing workforce through below inflation rate raises, exhausting work schedules, substandard pay and benefits for second-tier workers and the virtual enslavement of temporary workers. Workers in the new joint venture battery plants will not be covered by the same national contracts as the Big Three and will make poverty wages whether they are in the UAW or not.

As for Fain and the rest of the UAW bureaucracy, they only have two concerns. First, how to preserve the financial and institutional interests of the bloated UAW apparatus during the transition to electric vehicles. Second, how to package a contract that they can shove down the throats of an increasingly restive workforce determined to overturn decades of UAW-backed concessions.

While issuing blustering criticisms of Biden's federal subsidies for the automakers to shift to EV production, the real attitude of Fain & Co. to their supposed "enemies" in the corporate boardrooms of the Big Three was revealed by the UAW's groveling appeal to the US Environmental Protection Agency to roll back proposed carbon reduction targets on the automakers in order to protect their profits and market share.

The "EPA must recognize that the current domestic auto assembly footprint is heavily weighted towards the profitable light-duty truck and SUVs that are tasked with funding the EV transition," a UAW statement last week said. "We fear the proposed standards are premature and risk disrupting the market that will make the EV transition possible," the statement continued, before urging the EPA to "continue to work with all key stakeholders to ensure the new rules do not disproportionately impact domestic union auto production."

The Biden administration has also selected long-time corporate hatchet man and Democratic Party operative Gene Sperling to oversee the negotiations and do everything possible to prevent a strike that would disrupt the administration's plans to accelerate EV competition against China and military confrontation with Russia and China.

Contrary to the Fain administration's "militant" rhetoric and posturing, the UAW "bargaining" committee does not speak for rank-and-file workers. It speaks for the auto companies, which have propped up the UAW's assets with billions of dollars funneled through the "joint labor-management" programs, even as the UAW's membership has fallen from 1.5 million in 1979 to less than 400,000 today. The high salaries of Fain and hundreds of other union functionaries depend entirely on imposing the dictates of corporate America.

In his first months in office, Fain has demonstrated he will proceed no differently than his predecessors, as proven most starkly by the UAW's betrayal of the 40-day strike by more than 500 Clarios auto battery workers in Holland, Ohio. After workers twice rejected UAW-backed concession contracts, 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.

Fain starved out the Clarios workers on just \$500 a week in strike pay, kept workers in the dark on talks with management, only provided cherry-picked contract "highlights" before ratification votes, and virtually blacked out the strike to keep other UAW members

uninformed. At the same time, Fain ordered 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.

As one Clarios worker told the WWSWS, "The rank and file in the Big Three have to stand up for their demands. The UAW did nothing for us. The contract they signed was so full of loopholes that it's opening the way to take the jobs away from workers not on the new 12-hour schedule. What the UAW officials did to us was ugly, and it's still ugly."

If workers are going to have real control over their coming struggle, they must create new centers of power by organizing rank-and-file committees in every factory and expanding the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Such committees will provide the way for workers to break through the information blackout by the UAW bureaucracy, communicate and coordinate action across factories, companies and national borders, and transfer power and decision-making from the apparatus to the workers on the shop floor.

A statement published by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network earlier this week laid out a series of concrete demands that workers should fight for, including no plant closures or layoffs, a 40 percent general wage increase, the restoration of COLA cost-of-living raises, the end of all tiers and "in-progression" schemes, the immediate rollover of temporary workers to full-time status, and the reestablishment of the eight-hour day.

The statement explained, "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."

It continued:

"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."

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