

Media touts “new era” for UAW, as union carries out closed-door talks with Big Three automakers

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The corporate media have responded with universally glowing coverage to the decision by United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain to decline participating in the symbolic handshake ceremony with the CEOs of the Big Three—General Motors, Ford and Stellantis—which typically marks the formal opening of contract negotiations.

Instead of the traditional handshake with executives, Fain and other top UAW officials organized a series of photo-ops of “membership handshakes” at Detroit-area auto plants on Wednesday.

Publications from the *Wall Street Journal* to the *New York Times*, to *Automotive News* and the *Detroit Free Press* heralded the publicity stunts as a sign of a turn to a more “combative” or “confrontational” stance by the UAW, that it is seeking “meaningful gains,” or even an indication that it is “ready to go to war.”

Automotive News declared, “The UAW is showing a willingness to try new strategies and discard the status quo as it seeks meaningful gains.” The *Wall Street Journal* described Fain as “a new reform-minded president who is trying to restore camaraderie at the UAW after a multiyear corruption scandal.”

The *Detroit News*, long a mouthpiece for the auto companies, cited comments from Wayne State University business Professor Marick Masters, who declared, “A new dawn has arrived” in the UAW. There is “an ideological shift on the part of the UAW,” Masters continued, “and moving away from what you might call the neoliberal policies of the last several decades to a more socialistic conception of workplace relations.”

Workers should ask themselves: Why is the corporate media building up Fain & Co. as fighters? Why is the lack of a handshake being made into a pivotal event?

Both the UAW bureaucracy and the media are well aware of the widespread discontent pent up among autoworkers, after decades of plant closures, wage cuts and concessions imposed by the union apparatus. Workers are particularly

keen to win large wage increases and cost-of-living adjustments to offset inflation, abolish the tier system and win major improvements to working hours and benefits.

Fain’s so-called “reform” administration has been elevated to the top of the UAW by the ruling class as a defensive response to this sentiment. They are employing their “combative” rhetoric in order to sap workers’ initiative and head off an explosive movement outside the control of the bureaucracy.

The media are promoting Fain’s credentials as a reformer because they know that behind all the blustering rhetoric about “corporate greed,” Fain and his lieutenants are known quantities, having worked loyally in the pro-corporate bureaucracy for decades. The editors at the *Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the auto industry publications are well aware that Fain backed the brutal concessions contract at Chrysler in 2009 which halved wages for new hires, when Fain was a member of the UAW-Chrysler National Bargaining Committee.

The UAW communications department, meanwhile, is using the praise showered on it by the *Times*—which itself backed the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry and mass layoffs under Obama—as well as *Automotive News* in its leaflets in an effort to boost its credibility.

The company executives, for their part, understand these are symbolic gestures which the new UAW administration is making to establish some degree of credibility, and have responded mildly in their press statements.

While the media coverage has promoted the false narrative of “adversarial” negotiations, in reality, the UAW bureaucracy and the companies, as well as the White House, are engaged in a conspiracy to impose historic attacks on workers’ jobs and wages, as the corporations seek to impose the cost of the transition to electric vehicles onto workers. The Biden administration is expecting to rely on the UAW apparatus to contain and suppress opposition and impose the automakers’ dictates, as it seeks to transition to a war-time

economy, escalating the war against Russia and preparing for military conflict with China.

Despite all the talk of “transparency” by Fain, workers are being kept completely in the dark about what the companies are demanding days after the formal opening of the contract talks.

The actions of the Fain administration in its first few months speak far louder than all its rhetoric. The UAW International isolated and sold out the strike of Clarios battery workers, forcing workers at the Big Three plants to handle scab-made batteries, before pushing through a contract workers had twice voted to reject. At the same time, the UAW apparatus has not lifted a finger to fight the move by Stellantis to put a number of its plants on “critical status,” allowing them to mandate 12-hour shifts, seven days a week.

“He acts like he’s riding in on a white horse to protect us, but he voted to take everything away from us”

During last Wednesday’s photo-ops, Fain and an entourage of bureaucrats gathered at plants in the Detroit area for publicity stunts. These events were largely met with indifference and avoidance from workers at the plants.

“People here didn’t even know there was a UAW election,” one GM Subsystems worker at Factory Zero in Detroit/Hamtramck told the WSWS. Pointing to the claims by Fain that the UAW was going to lead a huge fight against the auto companies, she added, “I’ve been in the auto industry for 25 years, and I know flatulence when I hear it, and that’s just a nicer word to call it. Fain only got 3 percent of the vote of the UAW members, and those were mostly his own people.”

Another GM Subsystems worker added, “I heard Fain on his Facebook Live event saying the bosses can’t call us ‘family’ while they are taking away our jobs and stuff. What he says sounds good, but the real deal is that when he was in there negotiating contracts, he gave up COLA and signed the contract that expanded the two tiers. He acts like he’s riding in on a white horse to protect us, but he voted to take everything away from us.

“We do need to fight. We’re getting paid much less than the regular autoworkers here, and they want to use us as cheap labor to push the higher paid workers out. They’ve got a new supervisor who cut all our overtime, and GM Subsystems workers only get 20 percent of the profit sharing.”

A worker at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant said,

“You have all these UAW officials out here, but when you’re in the plant and you need them, they won’t do anything. You ask them to protect you, and they say, ‘I’ll get back to you.’”

The media reports boost the “reform” credentials of Fain’s administration, while at the same time they cover up the widespread voter disenfranchisement in the UAW’s national elections last year. *US News* reported that Fain was “the first UAW leader to win office in a direct vote by the rank and file” and that “the membership is behind him.”

These claims have been refuted repeatedly by Will Lehman, a rank-and-file worker at Mack Trucks, who ran for the presidency of the UAW on a rank-and-file platform to abolish the bureaucracy. In a series of challenges submitted over the election results—and most recently, a lawsuit against the Department of Labor—Lehman documented the systematic effort by the UAW apparatus to ensure the lowest possible participation by the rank-and-file membership in the election. The vast majority of workers were not informed an election was taking place, and the election was plagued by issues with ballots, resulting in a turnout of only 9 percent in the first round.

As Ford, Stellantis and GM are looking to impose cuts, push out senior workers and shift to even lower tier, lower wage workers, workers can place no confidence in the UAW bureaucracy to fight for their demands. Despite all the rhetoric about a “new dawn” arriving, the same bureaucracy that allowed decades of concessions still controls the UAW.

Autoworkers can prevail in the coming struggle, but it will only be by developing and trusting their own initiative and strength, not by placing faith in the UAW officialdom. The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network is working to build an alliance of militant, worker-controlled committees across plants and companies, so that workers can share information, communicate with each other and prepare common action to secure their interests.



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