

“It’s happening in France, now it’s our turn”: Chicago Ford workers speak on contract fight, growing strike wave in US and worldwide

Our reporters
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For more information on joining and the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network at Chicago Ford and other plants, fill out the form at the end of this article. Sign up for text message updates on the Big Three contract fight by texting AUTO to (866) 847-1086.

Autoworkers at Ford Chicago assembly and stamping plant expressed their determination to win substantial raises and other improvements in discussions with a *World Socialist Web Site* Autoworker Newsletter campaign team Monday. The workers also spoke about the growing strike wave of workers in the US and internationally, and the Biden’s administration’s efforts to divert social opposition through the promotion of militarism and war.

With the contract for 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the US and another 20,000 in Canada expiring in mid-September, workers made clear their willingness to strike to restore cost-of-living raises, pensions and equal pay for second-tier workers, and other concessions accepted by the United Auto Workers union in 2009.

Campaigners distributed hundreds of copies of the statement, “What autoworkers need to win the 2023 Big Three contract battle,” by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network.

When asked what autoworkers needed in the contract, many workers stated bluntly, “We need more money,” pointing to the impossibly high living expenses in the Chicago area, where the average price for a gallon of gas is \$4.39. “I don’t know how the people with families and kids are making it,” an older worker at the Chicago Stamping Plant said.

“We want more money, give us all our things that we lost, we want them back. Cost of living, pensions, everything,” one worker from the paint department at the Chicago Assembly Plant declared. “We’re willing to do whatever to get it back.”

Throughout the pandemic, the worker added, autoworkers have been deemed “essential workers” and forced to work long hours, including 11-12 hours per shift at Chicago assembly, leaving little time for their families. On top of this, workers are being forced to take their accumulated paid time off (PTO) during the factory’s summer changeover instead of when they want it.

“We want our vacation time back,” another worker said. At the same time, young workers were being laid off and temporary workers were having their hours cut to increase economic pressure on newer workers. “Right before the contract, they’re rolling out these layoffs, saying they are low on parts. Is it a coincidence or are they trying to make workers take whatever they have on the table because they haven’t been working?”

Many workers had little or no confidence in the new leadership of the UAW bureaucracy, headed by Shawn Fain, who was installed in a rigged election, which effectively disenfranchised 90 percent of the membership.

“I have no hope in the union, they’ve sold us out so many times,” one said, adding that “Fain is no different, he’s all smoke and mirrors—just like the government.”

“They’re all criminals, the UAW, all of them,” another said, “The union is so corrupt, everyone there is so spineless.”

A “temporary full-time worker” at the assembly plant said he voted for Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president who ran against Fain and incumbent president Ray Curry. Lehman has filed a lawsuit against the Biden’s administration’s Department of Labor, which has sanctioned the union election even though the UAW did little or nothing to even inform workers that it was happening.

“I watched the YouTube video about the protest filed by Will showing that the union election was BS. He said there

were more ballots returned for bad addresses, than the number of ballots counted. I agree with Will, the power should be from the bottom up, not from the UAW leaders at the top.”

“We got new faces,” in the union, another worker said. “The UAWD (Fain’s Unite All Workers for Democracy slate) has gotten most positions. But here in Chicago, we’re feeling we are going to get stuck with another contract that nobody wants. We’ve voted down every contract since we’ve been here. I would like to see everybody get a pay raise of at least 20 percent to catch up with gas, the cost of living. They say inflation was nine percent last year, but it’s probably more, we are falling way behind.”

Discussing the fight for the expansion of rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor, to prepare an all-out strike by GM, Ford and Stellantis workers, one worker commented, “I am glad you gave me this newsletter. I have not been hearing anything. I listen to stuff on Facebook but nothing very concrete. It would be great for rank-and-file workers to take control of this fight,” she said as she left her contact info for text updates from the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee network.

Ford and the other automakers are using the transition to electric vehicles to cut jobs, reduce pay and create a new tier of “flexible” workers who can be transferred from plant to plant if demand for EVs falls. According to a recent report in the *Detroit News*, “The company wants the ability to move workers to factories building the most in-demand models, whether they’re powered by electricity or traditional internal combustion, according to Ford sources who requested anonymity discussing internal matters. The current union contract restricts Ford’s ability to flex production, they said.”

“I don’t like that,” the stamping worker said, referring to Ford’s demands. “I don’t know about the recycling these EV batteries, that might be worse for the environment than anything else right now. And everybody can’t afford electric vehicles. We can’t, and we build them.”

Responding to the demand in the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee statement, calling for a reduction on the workweek to 30 hours with no loss of pay to preserve jobs and distribute available work since electric vehicles are require fewer manhours to produce, the worker said, “I agree with that. That’s sounds like a two-way street, not just a one-way street.”

Campaigners also distributed copies of the newsletter with the statement by the WSWs International Editorial Board, “Vilnius NATO summit unveils plans for global domination.”

While workers have been subjected to relentless

propaganda by the media and Biden administration presenting the US/NATO proxy war against Russia as a war to protect Ukraine from Russian aggression, many workers expressed suspicion or outright hostility to Biden’s reckless military escalation against Russia and China. “I don’t agree with all this money and arms going to Ukraine,” a young assembly worker told the WSWs. “We don’t have any business being there. To me, it’s the Middle East all over again. It was for oil then, and now it’s for lithium and other resources. We’ve been at war for decades, and it’s the people who pay.”

“They want to take what’s really important here, and push [our attention] overseas and get us worried about that,” another worker said. “They’re masters at that. They’ve been doing it for years. That’s what the government’s doing. “But people are getting hip to that. With guys on social media, hopefully we can enlighten some people.”

Many workers commented on the growing wave of strikes by workers around the world, including the 65,000 film and television actors who joined striking screenwriters on the picket lines against the giant entertainment conglomerates last week. “It’s in France, it’s everywhere,” the assembly worker said. “I think it’s our turn to stand up and get vocal.”

“I saw the actors walked out,” the stamping worker said. “I heard they are using Artificial Intelligence against the actors—I don’t like that. They wanted to bring AI forklifts in here, and there goes all the fork jobs. There are so many hazards in here, things are bound to get messed up if you don’t have somebody driving them with experience.”

“In London, the actors walked out of the premier of *Oppenheimer* in solidarity with the writers,” a young worker at the Ford assembly plant said. “That was great. Last year, Biden and Congress made the railroad strike illegal. Biden says he’s the most ‘pro-union’ president ever, but he’s not for us. Everybody is getting tired of the high cost of living and the conditions we face,” he said before signing up for more information on rank-and-file committees.

For more information on joining and building rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below. Sign up for text message updates on the Big Three contract fight by texting AUTO to (866) 847-1086.



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