

What did Biden and the UAW president discuss at the White House?

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On Wednesday, US President Joe Biden held a closed-door meeting with United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain in the West Wing of the White House, with less than two months to go until contracts expire for 170,000 workers at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis in the US and Canada.

Fain had initially requested to meet with senior White House officials while in Washington, but when Biden learned of the request, he asked to speak with the UAW president privately, administration officials told the media.

What was Biden so intent on discussing with Fain face-to-face? While no transcript was released, it does not require much imagination to glean the essential content. A highly experienced political representative of big business, Biden is intensely focused on the suppression of the class struggle, with the assistance of the union bureaucracies, in order to 1) defend the profit interests of the corporations and 2) ensure that the war against Russia and preparations for war against China are not disrupted.

A central question posed by Biden to Fain would have been along the lines of, “Shawn, do you have the situation under control?”

Anger is near the boiling point among autoworkers and other sections of the working class in the US and Canada. Walkouts in recent weeks have encompassed multiple industries, including tens of thousands of actors and screenwriters, 1,400 Wabtec locomotive manufacturing workers in Pennsylvania, and 1,400 National Steel Car railcar production workers in Ontario. A strike by 7,400 dockworkers in British Columbia was relaunched Tuesday, only to be shut down again within hours by the ILWU after being declared “illegal” by Liberal Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s labour minister.

With strike deadlines for 20,000 Yellow trucking workers on Monday and more than 300,000 UPS workers on July 31, the potential exists for a dramatic expansion of

strike activity to levels not seen for decades.

The possible emergence of a powerful and militant struggle by autoworkers, in both the US and Canada, cannot help but produce extreme nervousness in the White House, since it has the potential to rapidly galvanize a far broader movement of the working class and upend Washington’s war efforts in Ukraine and elsewhere.

The auto industry is undergoing a rapid transformation. According to the UAW’s carefully crafted, vague account of Wednesday’s meeting, given to *Politico* by Communications Director Jonah Furman—a former *Labor Notes* staff writer and member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America—Fain asked for Biden’s support in the contract talks and for “stronger labor provisions” in the White House’s tax incentives and other corporate handouts in relation to electronic vehicle (EV) production.

The corporations are hoping to shed tens if not hundreds of thousands of jobs as part of the transition to EV, while also establishing even lower-paid tiers and more precarious working conditions. At the same time, control of EV supply chains is viewed by Washington as critical to its plans for global supremacy and its preparations for war with China.

If Fain asked for Biden’s support, however, it is not on behalf the 1.1 million active and retired autoworkers in the UAW that he is making the request. Rather, he is seeking the White House’s support for the UAW bureaucracy’s own privileged interests. Fain and the UAW officialdom—who know they are widely viewed as corrupt by autoworkers both in the UAW and outside it—want assurances that Biden will use his powers to all but mandate the presence of the UAW at the automakers’ new EV plants, ensuring an expanded flow of dues to the apparatus from impoverished workers.

Shortly before his assassination by a Stalinist agent in

1940, Leon Trotsky, the great Marxist revolutionary, wrote with immense incisiveness and at a far earlier stage of the process: “There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power.”

In the present, Biden, the self-described “most pro-union president in history,” has sought to even more tightly integrate the union bureaucracies with the state. The administration has relied on the bureaucracies to control and suppress a series of struggles that threaten the foreign policy aims of US imperialism.

The upper-middle class bureaucrats who control the unions, for their part, are returning the embrace of the state. Fain’s talks with Biden Wednesday were part of a blitz of meetings with virtually the entire Democratic Party Congressional leadership and other high-level administration officials. The UAW president met with White House Chief of Staff Jeff Zients; National Economic Council Director Lael Brainard, and Gene Sperling, a senior economic adviser and Biden’s point person in the Big Three contract talks. Sperling, a longtime Democratic Party corporate hatchet man, was on the Obama-Biden administration’s Auto Task Force, overseeing the historic job and wage cuts imposed, with the support of the UAW, in the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry.

These capitalist politicians, who will be falsely hailed as “allies” by the UAW, are, in fact, vicious enemies of the working class, as most clearly shown in their role in banning a strike by 110,000 railroad workers last year and imposing a contract workers opposed.

The intervention of the White House already in the Big Three autoworkers’ fight is a demonstration that workers face not merely a struggle over a contract, but a political struggle against the capitalist state.

Among Biden’s concerns is that the Fain administration is viewed by autoworkers, correctly, as illegitimate. The UAW’s national elections last year were characterized by widespread and deliberate suppression of the vote by the UAW bureaucracy, as detailed in a series of official challenges by Will Lehman, a rank-and-file worker and socialist who ran for UAW president. The bureaucracy refused to update its membership database with workers’ current addresses and contact information, resulting in a turnout of just 9 percent and more ballots being returned as “undeliverable” than were actually counted.

A lawsuit by Lehman last November calling for an

emergency extension of voting deadlines was opposed by Biden’s Department of Labor. A subsequent complaint filed by Lehman with the UAW “monitor”—itself comprised of corporate law firms closely tied to GM and other automakers—was also rejected, and an appeal to the Department of Labor (DOL) was denied without explanation. Lehman has sued the DOL, demanding that the elections be re-run.

If there is one sentiment that both Biden and Fain shared as they huddled together in the White House, it is fear. The ruling class and its toadies in the union apparatus are terrified of the powerful growth of the class struggle, which is beginning to break free from the stranglehold of the apparatus itself.

To unite the struggles of all sections of the working class and prevent their sabotage by the union bureaucracies, workers require structures that are controlled and led by them—rank-and-file factory and workplace committees. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is working to assist workers in establishing such committees throughout every industry, in the US and in other countries.

As the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network—a growing collection of committees affiliated with the IWA-RFC in the auto industry—wrote in a statement on July 9, “Any strategy based on ‘pressuring’ corporate management and their representatives in the Democratic and Republican Parties has again and again proved disastrous for the working class... Autoworkers will win this fight, not through appeals to company executives and big business politicians, but by means of *hard and uncompromising class struggle*.” Workers wishing to join this struggle should contact the WSWS to get involved with a rank-and-file committee today.



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