

“They’re trying to strip us of our right to our livelihoods”: Ford Kentucky Truck workers denounce Biden intervention into auto talks

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Workers at the Ford Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville, Kentucky, spoke out against the Biden administration’s intervention into their contract struggle and vowed to take up a “tooth-and-nail fight” against the Dearborn, Michigan-based auto corporation this summer.

Contracts for 170,000 autoworkers in North America, including 57,000 Ford workers in the US and another 4,100 in Canada, expire in mid-September. Louisville is a major manufacturing hub for Ford, with 8,700 workers producing heavy-duty pickup and large sports utility trucks at the Kentucky Truck Plant (KTP) and another 3,200 making SUVs at the nearby Louisville Assembly Plant.

A team of WSWS Autoworker Newsletter supporters distributed hundreds of copies of the statement, “What autoworkers need to win the 2023 Big Three contract battle,” issued by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to KTP workers on Thursday and spoke with them about the issues in their struggle.

The day before, UAW President Shawn Fain held a closed-door meeting with US President Joe Biden in the White House. Biden, who intervened to block a strike by 110,000 railroad workers last year, is relying on the United Auto Workers bureaucracy to suppress workers’ resistance to the massive job and wage cuts, which the automakers are planning to finance their transition to electric vehicles. For its part, the UAW bureaucracy is seeking the support of the White House

to protect its own self-interests as it oversees the drastic reduction of jobs and living standards in the industry.

“We need a higher wage and more respect,” a veteran worker said. “It’s a billion-dollar corporation, and we are not respected. We’re not robots, we’re humans. We got cartilage, bones, ligaments. ... Call us by name, instead of looking at us as a number. I don’t want to strike, but if we have to, so be it. I want to win. I don’t want to be national headline news; I want to be the news that got the job done. If we are going to strike, give us what we want.”

Ask if he heard that the UAW met with President Biden, one veteran worker asked, “And what was the topic of discussion?” Told that Biden intervened to block a strike by railroad workers, he said, “Yes, I remember. That’s what they are trying to implement with us. ... They’re trying to strip us of our right to our livelihoods.”

Another worker asked, “Why would Biden meet with the UAW president? It’s none of his business. We saw what he did to the railroad workers, and we don’t like it. I want to know what’s being discussed between the UAW, Biden and the companies. It should be public knowledge. This is our lives.”

An older worker added, “Biden getting involved with this stuff, I don’t think it’s his business. Fain went to the White House! Biden appointed an administrator to watch over negotiations. Why is he getting involved in our business?”

Workers were also distrustful of the claims by Fain and his supporters that the UAW is prepared to wage a historic struggle against its “corporate enemies” even though the UAW bureaucracy, including Fain himself, has been in bed with them for decades.

“We need information, instead of just sitting here waiting for a strike,” a young worker said, before expressing skepticism in Fain’s claims that the UAW apparatus had been reformed. “The union is a scam. The UAW presidents who signed the last two contracts were thrown in jail, including Dennis Williams who had a house built for him in Black Lake with our dues money. The union keeps bringing back these contract ‘highlights’ and never shows us what they really agreed to. Then they announce contracts have been passed by rigging the election.”

Another worker said, “The union doesn’t represent us anymore. They’re going to try and ram through another sellout.”

Several workers also commented about the bogus UAW election, which installed Fain with about 3 percent of the members’ votes. By failing to inform members about the election or updating mailing addresses, the UAW apparatus deliberately suppressed the turnout, leading to the lowest participation in any union election in history. This was detailed by Will Lehman, a rank-and-file worker and socialist candidate for UAW president last year, in his lawsuit against the Biden administration’s Department of Labor, which upheld the sham election.

One KTP worker said he “didn’t see any ads or anything” about the UAW election. When told that the union bureaucracy effectively excluded 90 percent of the membership, one worker replied, “Damn, so basically they got the same people in there.” Another worker replied, “It doesn’t matter who is in charge, the union officials look out for themselves.”

Will Lehman, who visited KTP in the summer of 2022, won a significant vote from workers who were attracted to his call for the abolition of the UAW apparatus and the transfer of power to workers on the shopfloor through the formation of rank-and-file committees.

One worker who voted for Will said, “The rank and file have to take control. I come for a long line of union households; my dad worked at Harvester. I’ve seen what the union was and what it has become. They say we got you paid holidays. I say that was in 1953-54. What have you done lately? We need wage increases. What once was a good wage no longer is because of inflation. We need pensions for those of us who don’t have it.”

“We have to get together and stand. We’re the ones who control things, if we allow ourselves to be. That means me standing next to you no matter what our differences are, and saying, ‘Hey, we’re doing this for each other, not just for you.’ That’s what we have to do.”

Referring to the strike by actors and writers and the upcoming deadline for 340,000 UPS workers, he said, “We have separate struggles, but we’re united. The ones who created the content need to be treated fairly off of what is being made from that content. We create the vehicles that go out the door and put the money in their pockets.”

His co-worker added, “I often imagine a bunch of rich people playing the Monopoly game with the poor underneath them. When the people at the bottom finally stand up, their game is over.”

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