

Automotive News panel: Big Three relying on UAW apparatus to deliver for Wall Street in contract talks

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A livestream discussion Thursday between Jamie Butters, executive editor of industry journal *Automotive News*, and Art Wheaton, the director of labor studies at Cornell University, on the contract negotiations between the United Auto Workers and the Detroit automakers provides an insight into the nervousness in ruling circles over the prospects of a strike.

The question repeatedly posed to Wheaton was whether newly installed UAW President Shawn Fain would be able to contain the anger of the 150,000 workers employed at the Big Three under conditions of record inflation after decades of concessions. In the run-up to the September 14 contract expiration, all of the Detroit automakers have been posting bumper profits, totally over \$22 billion in the first half-year alone.

Wheaton made it clear that the auto companies had no intention of making any significant concessions, such as restoring company-paid pensions or resuming cost-of-living raises, that would raise their “fixed costs.” Far from conceding anything, the auto companies are intent on imposing the full cost of the transition to electric vehicles onto the backs of workers.

To carry this out Wall Street is relying, as it has for decades, on the reactionary UAW apparatus. Behind the bombastic rhetoric of Fain is a deep fear that the struggle of autoworkers may escape the control of the union bureaucracy. The concern of the ruling class about the ability of the UAW to continue suppressing the class struggle under conditions of a mounting global strike wave was expressed in the meetings by President Biden and top Democrats with Fain on July 19 in Washington. Biden’s motives for the meeting with Fain were twofold: to make clear that there must not be any disruption to the flow of corporate profits

nor any disruption on the home front as the US prepares for WWII against China and Russia.

In response to a question about management’s concerns about Fain’s ability to contain the militancy of workers and their demands, Wheaton said that automakers “are scared to death” by the prospect of a strike, whose course was unpredictable. At the same time he put the likelihood of a strike at 90 percent, arguing that a strike—likely limited to a few engine and transmission factories—might be needed by the UAW leadership “to convince all of those members to vote yes on a contract. Getting a 51 percent ratification is not easy, and you have to prove that you pushed it as far as you can.”

Wheaton, an establishment-trained labor relations “expert,” is a tried and true defender of big business, often cited in corporate press. At the same time he is an adviser and apologist for the trade union bureaucracy. There is no contradiction in this, as the unions long ago abandoned even the remotest connection to the class struggle or the defense of workers’ interests in favor of unrestrained collaboration with the employers.

In an interview with National Public Radio, Wheaton called the rotten settlement forced on railroad workers by the Biden administration last fall a “big win for employees,” falsely claiming the pro-management deal “gave workers everything they wanted.”

In the discussion with *Automotive News*, Wheaton stressed that one of the main preoccupations of the UAW leadership was to contain expectations. He stressed, “If you make hard and fast targets, it makes it harder to ratify.”

Butters pointed to the low turnout in the UAW presidential election, just 9 percent, the lowest voter

participation in any election in history held by a major union. “It is striking how few people actually voted, it’s not like he (Fain) has hundreds of thousands of adoring members.”

At one point, the discussion turned to the announcement of a sellout deal by the Teamsters in the contract negotiations covering 340,000 workers at UPS. The Biden administration and the corporations are collectively holding their breath to see if the Teamster bureaucracy headed by Sean O’Brien can ram through the deal, which is tailored to the interests of management and meets none of the demands of the rank and file. The centerpiece of the contract is an increase in the starting wages of part-time workers to \$21 an hour—not much more than Amazon pays its non-union workers and almost half as much as a UPS part-timer made in 1978, taking inflation into account. Far from being a “historic” gain, this is in line with the needs of management, which has not been able to attract and retain enough workers at the current poverty-level starting wage of \$15.50.

Wheaton said that Fain would likely pattern the UAW contract on the Teamsters at UPS, focusing on a slightly higher starting wage for temp workers. “Some workers start at wages you could get at Target,” he said. Wheaton expressed admiration for the tactics employed by O’Brien, including the theatrical “walkout” of contract talks, aimed at blocking a strike, noting “Similar strategies could be useful for the UAW.”

As the WSWS wrote analyzing the UPS sellout, “the real author of the tentative agreement is not to be found in the bargaining room in Washington D.C. but a short distance away in the White House,” which aims to use the union bureaucracy to strangle the emerging movement of the working class.

For its part, the UAW apparatus headed by Fain, who appeared with O’Brien at a rally in New York, is seeking the backing of the Biden administration. In particular, the UAW wants support for its bid to organize the new electric vehicle plants being built by the auto companies, promising in return to supply the auto companies with a productive, low cost workforce policed by the union bureaucracy.

Another revealing exchange took place regarding the contract negotiations in Canada between Unifor and the Big Three, which are for the first time in decades taking

place at the same time as the auto contract talks in the US. Debunking claims by the defenders of the UAW bureaucracy that this would strengthen the fight of workers, Butters stated bluntly that Unifor and the UAW would be “competing for investments,” adding, “they will be offering things to the automakers against each other.”

This is the logic of the nationalist, pro-capitalist program of the trade union bureaucracy, which presents the workers of other countries as the enemy, not the corporations. Ever since the formation of the Canadian Auto Workers union, now Unifor, through the split with the UAW in the mid-1980s, in contract after contract the two unions have engaged in a bidding war to reduce the wages of an ever-dwindling number of dues-paying members.

This makes all the more urgent the independent mobilization of the rank and file against this anti-worker conspiracy of the UAW apparatus, the auto companies and the Biden administration. It is necessary for workers to expand the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to establish lines of communication and coordinate actions by workers across different factories, companies and countries. The task of these committees, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), is to empower the workers on the shop floor in opposition to the pro-company UAW and Unifor apparatuses.



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