

Auto companies threaten jobs, as UAW bureaucracy seeks to head off opposition with demagogic “members’ demands”

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Seeking to head off the growing determination by 170,000 US and Canadian autoworkers for an all-out struggle to win back decades of concessions from the Big Three automakers, United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain presented limited information about the UAW’s supposed “demands” to the companies this week. Contracts for 150,000 Ford, General Motors and Stellantis workers in the UAW expire on September 14, and agreements for another 20,000 Canadian workers in Unifor at the Big Three expire September 18.

Fain’s self-described “reform” administration is well aware that it is sitting on a powder keg of pent-up anger among workers. The UAW’s leaders know they are widely viewed with wary hostility by workers, who despise the pro-corporate union bureaucracy of which Fain and his lieutenants are the longtime representatives. Every action UAW officials are taking is aimed at blocking a movement of workers developing outside their control.

Accordingly, Fain’s administration—with the assistance of staffers from the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America—has adapted its public relations strategy surrounding the formal opening of contract talks, seeking to present the bureaucracy as being “back in the fight” and staging a number of publicity stunts, such as declining to shake executives’ hands at the opening of negotiations.

In a Facebook Live video on Tuesday, Fain announced what he said were the UAW’s contract proposals to companies.

The UAW’s so-called “members’ demands” are a series of measures which are widely supported and called for by rank-and-file workers but which have been given up by the UAW bureaucracy in concessions to the companies in previous contracts: the restoration of cost-of-living raises

(COLA); the elimination of tiers; the return of defined-benefit pensions for all workers; the increase of current retirees’ pay; the reintroduction of retiree medical benefits; and the end of the abuse of temps.

The UAW is reportedly proposing a 46 percent general wage increase, according to a report in the *Detroit News* Friday. It is also said to be “seeking” a 32-hour work week at 40 hours pay, *Automotive News* reported.

“These aren’t my demands,” Fain said in his Facebook Live video Tuesday, in comments intended for his corporate listeners. “These come straight from the membership.”

Autoworkers undoubtedly are determined to achieve a breakthrough and major advances in wages, benefits and working conditions. But the presentation of the “members’ demands” by Fain was of a dishonest, demagogic character, since the UAW leadership has absolutely no intention or strategy to achieve these measures.

The UAW president knows that the companies are dead set on imposing the costs of the transition to electric vehicles onto the workers and that they are seeking to carry out historic attacks on jobs and working conditions, dwarfing even the scale of the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry.

The hard line of corporate management was made clear in several statements by the companies this week.

General Motors arrogantly rejected the possibility of restoring things such as COLA and pensions out of hand. “The breadth and scope of the Presidential Demands, at face value, would threaten our ability to do what’s right for the long-term benefit of the team.” By “team,” of course, GM means not its workforce but rather its extravagantly paid executives and large investors.

In a thinly veiled threat against workers’ jobs, it continued, “We think it’s important to protect U.S. manufacturing and jobs in an industry that is dominated by non-unionized competition.”

Stellantis and Ford, meanwhile, both responded to the release of the UAW’s contract proposal in more guarded

language, while reiterating their intention to collaborate with the UAW apparatus in achieving “competitiveness,” which invariably entails attacks on workers.

Ford wrote that it would pursue “creative solutions during this time when our dramatically changing industry needs a skilled and competitive workforce more than ever.”

Stellantis wrote that it would “work constructively and collaboratively with the UAW to find solutions that will result in a contract that is competitive in the global market,” claiming it was “not seeking a concessionary agreement.”

Earlier this week, however, Stellantis issued a letter clearly seeking to threaten and intimidate workers. In an underlined passage, Chief Operating Officer Mark Stewart wrote that the contract negotiations would “impact your future and that of your family and community,” and later insisted that the company had to “have flexibility in how we run our operations.”

The UAW knows that any sign that it is preparing to impose concessions on behalf of management will inflame opposition among workers. UAW officials are particularly concerned to create the appearance that they are not engaging in the type of closed-door talks with management that have previously produced brutal concessionary contracts backed by the UAW apparatus—including Fain himself, when he endorsed the historic attacks contained in the 2009 contract as a member of the UAW-Chrysler negotiating team.

But there is already ample evidence the union bureaucracy is conspiring with the companies once again. The Fain administration completely sold out the first major strike under its watch, forcing a concessions contract on hundreds of Clarios battery workers in Ohio in June, after workers had twice voted to reject it.

During Fain’s Facebook Live video Tuesday, he falsely praised the tentative agreement reached between the Teamsters and UPS as “ending tiers.” In fact, the Teamsters’ deal has provoked outrage among workers for introducing a new tier division among part-time workers and keeping their pay at poverty levels.

In perhaps the clearest sign that a sellout is being prepared, Fain’s administration has been coordinating closely with the Democratic Party and the Biden administration—political representatives of the corporate and financial aristocracy and proven enemies of the working class. Fain has praised a letter by Democratic senators claiming to support higher wages for EV battery workers. But virtually all of the senators voted to ban a strike by railroad workers last year and impose a contract rail workers were voting against.

Biden, for his part, was vice president during the Obama administration’s restructuring of the auto industry, which entailed a catastrophic decline in workers’ living standards.

The UAW bureaucracy does not have a strategy to win any of the demands it says it is making. Its overriding concern is securing its own institutional interests, including establishing new “joint” labor-management programs and getting dues-paying members at the EV battery plants, while attempting to keep a lid on the seething opposition among workers.

Underlying all of Fain’s rhetoric about “corporate greed” is an attempt to divert anger from the objective source of the problems workers face—capitalism—while promoting the illusion that the corporations’ profit interests can be reconciled with workers’ interests, if only executives’ “greed” can be reined in. Describing a proposal for a “Working Families Protection Program” to pay workers for “community service and other things” during layoffs, Fain said Tuesday, “Companies can still make a healthy profit, and it’ll keep our communities healthy also.”

Autoworkers are on a collision course with the corporations, the Biden administration and the UAW bureaucracy.

The critical task is for workers to seize the initiative now and develop their own organizational structures—rank-and-file committees at each factory, stretching across every department and shift, and linking up with auto parts workers and other sections of workers, including UPS workers and striking actors and writers.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is working to assist workers in building committees and forming communication networks across the plants in the US, Canada, Mexico and internationally. Such committees will form the basis for workers to resist and overcome the pro-corporate conspiracies of the UAW bureaucracy and prepare a real fight to win workers’ demands, including preparations for an industry-wide strike across North America.



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