

Corporate media nervous over rising militancy among autoworkers, as UAW contract deadline looms

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7 August 2023

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Last week, United Auto Workers officials presented General Motors, Ford and Stellantis with their contract proposals, which UAW President Shawn Fain boasted were the “most audacious and ambitious demands in decades.” The labor agreements for 150,000 Big Three autoworkers expire in less than six weeks on September 14.

According to UAW and media accounts, the demands include the elimination of tiers in wages and benefits and “substantial wage increases,” which were later spelled out as a 20 percent upfront raise and 5 percent annual increases in each year of the contract, plus the restoration of cost-of-living adjustments (COLA). Also included are the restoration of company-paid pensions and retiree medical benefits for all workers and “more paid time off,” with Fain expressing support for “a 32-hour work week with 40 hours’ worth of pay.”

Fain’s administration and the reactionary bureaucracy it heads have no intention of achieving anything close to these demands. On the contrary, the UAW officialdom is conspiring with the companies and the Biden administration over how best to enforce massive attacks on workers’ jobs and wages.

Fain’s statements denouncing the “grotesque profits” of the corporations are recognized by management as hot air, necessary to maintain any credibility among an increasingly militant and restive workforce. Both management and the UAW bureaucracy know that if Fain were to tell workers what he and the auto corporations were really conspiring to do, he could face an uncontrollable revolt from the rank and file.

Workers cannot afford to wait and see what the UAW bureaucracy does. In advance of the contract expiration, workers must expand the network of rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, to disseminate information, counter the lies of management, the politicians, the UAW bureaucracy and the corporate-controlled media, and prepare to countermand the inevitable sellout by Fain & Co.

The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network,

affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), will give workers all the assistance possible in organizing a North America-wide strike to win what workers need, not what the corporations and politicians claim is “realistic” and necessary to maintain the profits of the corporate and financial parasites.

Despite Fain’s posturing, the auto executives have repeatedly expressed confidence that they will reach a “competitive contract” with the UAW apparatus, just as they have done with Fain’s corrupt predecessors for decades.

Nevertheless, within corporate and media circles there have been increasing expressions of concern that Fain’s rhetoric is raising the expectations of autoworkers and will make it even more difficult to ram through another concessionary contract.

“Pandering to the rank and file on a Facebook Live video does not get his members any closer to a contract,” an editorial board statement in *Crain’s Detroit* declared Monday. “If anything, it gets them further away as Fain hardens a rhetoric that he may find hard to step back from later as negotiations progress.”

While acknowledging that Fain was trying to navigate his way through a “fractured union,” a columnist for *Automotive News* warned, “by sharing all of the ideas of what could be won, he is setting expectations unreasonably high in a way that makes it too hard to win ratification for an agreement that ultimately will include some measure of compromise.

“Only time will tell how well he can walk that line: Getting members fired up to strike and demand gains commensurate with automakers’ pandemic-induced profit surge ... and then getting them to vote to accept a reasonably lucrative deal that comes up short of these early August fantasies.”

In fact, Fain’s own transition team warned of the dangers of setting “unreasonably high expectations” in a leaked memo earlier this year, saying it could lead to “despair/anger” among workers and stressed the need for improved “messaging” by the UAW apparatus.

Ultimately, it is not the publicity stunts and posturing organized by Fain’s PR department that worries the corporate media. What terrifies the representatives of the ruling elite is

the rising opposition among workers and their demands to overturn decades of UAW-backed concessions. The auto corporations, as the industry publication *Automotive News* said last week, “have no appetite for adding long-term structural costs such as pensions, cost-of-living adjustments, layoff protection or expanded retiree benefits.”

Crain's Detroit spelled this out in no uncertain terms in its editorial board statement Monday:

With the rapid inflation of recent years, a reasonable wage increase would help UAW workers maintain their standard of living.

But turning back the clock to reinstitute costly vestiges of the past such as retiree health care and defined-benefit pensions would be disastrous. It was the weight of those legacy obligations that drove the automakers to the brink during the financial crisis, prompting a federal bailout. We can't go back down that road and remain competitive on the world stage.

Fain's list of demands also calls for the elimination of tiers on wages and benefits, which was another important outcome of the bailout that allowed the automakers to regain their financial footing.

In other words, the auto corporations, and behind them Wall Street and the Biden administration, are determined to maintain the low-wage regime in the auto factories, which has left tens of thousands of second-tier, temporary and contract workers so poor that they cannot afford the vehicles they build. The massive concessions imposed by the Obama-Biden administration in 2009 set a new lower wage base rate for all manufacturing workers, accelerating the transfer of wealth from the working class to the corporate and financial oligarchy.

The ruling class has no intention of retreating and is threatening to use mass unemployment to beat back the demands of workers. The attacks by the ruling class include Monday's bankruptcy announcement at Yellow freight, threatening the jobs and pensions of 30,000 workers; the moves by the US Federal Reserve to raise interest rates to drive up unemployment; and the threat to use the conversion to electric vehicle production to destroy the jobs of nearly half the number of current autoworkers.

The ruling class assault can only be fought by mobilizing the full strength of autoworkers based on a program of an unrelenting fight to defend and advance the interests of the working class, regardless of its impact on the profits and business prerogatives of the capitalist class.

If the giant auto corporations cannot guarantee workers good-paying jobs, healthcare, secure retirement and other basic necessities, then they must be transformed into public enterprises, controlled democratically and owned collectively

by the working class as part of the socialist transformation of the US and international economy.

Fain's populist rhetoric has been adopted from Bernie Sanders and his former staffers, who now hold high-level positions within the UAW apparatus, such as UAW Communications Director Jonah Furman.

Like Sanders, Fain “rails” against greedy corporations and urges them to share their wealth and treat workers more fairly. But the source of the attacks on workers is not the greed of this or that owner, but rather the capitalist system, which is based on the private ownership of the giant industries and banks by a handful of capitalists whose wealth is derived from the exploitation of the working class.

Fain is already backtracking from his phony demands, citing the Teamsters sellout of the 340,000 UPS workers and the continued impoverishment of part-time workers as his model for “eliminating tiers.” He recently told the *Automotive News*, “I've promised nothing except we're going to work really hard to get the best agreement we can for our members. At the end of the day, this agreement's up to the membership. If they're not happy with it and don't think it goes far enough, they have every right to turn it down.”

Workers must judge Fain not on his word but his actions. After more than 500 Clarios auto battery workers in Toledo, Ohio, voted down two UAW-backed sellout contracts, Fain and the UAW bureaucracy at every level deliberately isolated the workers, enabled the Big Three companies to use batteries produced by scab labor at the plants, and starved the workers into accepting a contract that included a 3 percent pay increase and a 12-hour day with no overtime payments.

“We wanted to get rid of tiers, working 19 straight days in a row with only two days off, and other things too, just like the Big Three autoworkers,” said a veteran of the 40-day strike. “Fain said he was supporting us, but he completely sold us out. What he says looks good on paper but not in practice.”

“There are two different forces in the UAW,” the worker continued. “There are the workers on the floor, and there are committeemen, chairmen and top officials who are for the companies. If the workers at the Big Three leave it in the hands of the UAW officials, they are going to get screwed like we were. Don't listen to them. They are going to do whatever the company wants. The rank and file have to speak and act for themselves.”

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