

As Big Three presents massive concession demands

Lear auto parts workers in Indiana overwhelmingly reject UAW sellout contract in 95 percent “no” vote

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In another decisive repudiation of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy, on Sunday workers at the Lear Corporation seating plant in Hammond, Indiana, voted by 314-18, a 95 percent margin, to reject a tentative contract brought back by union negotiators.

The UAW asked workers to vote on a miserable offer that does not keep up with inflation, let alone restore past concessions given up by the union apparatus. Starting wages would go from \$15.50 an hour to \$17 an hour, below what many fast food workers earn, rising to just \$23 an hour by August 2027. Workers at top scale would get an insulting 56 cent pay raise and a \$1,500 bonus. Tiers would not be abolished.

The vote follows a UAW sellout agreement at the Hammond plant rammed through by the union bureaucracy in 2018. That year as well, workers defied demands for concessions, twice voting down UAW-backed deals. The UAW eventually declared ratification on a third deal, virtually identical to the first two, claiming a suspicious razor-thin margin of 359 in favor to 333 against.

During the previous contract talks in 2014, the UAW provoked outrage among workers both at Lear and beyond for falsely claiming that their deal had “ended tiers.” Shortly after union officials declared the contract ratified, it was revealed that a new, even lower-paid tier of “sub-assembly” workers had been agreed to.

The factory has been the site of repeated rebellions by rank-and-file workers in recent years. In 2020, workers carried out at least two wildcat work stoppages against the lack of protections from COVID-19. Workers had “stopped production and got into a huge screaming match with management and our union president over the unsafe conditions,” a worker explained to the WSWWS in September 2020.

The Lear plant employs approximately 1,000 workers and

produces seating for the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant, which builds the Ford Explorer, Lincoln Aviator and Police Interceptor Utility vehicles. The workers are objectively in a powerful position to win a decent contract, but the UAW has not set a strike deadline.

The vote by Lear workers once again underscores the chasm between the militant-sounding rhetoric coming out of the mouth of UAW President Shawn Fain and the daily reality of UAW-management collusion against workers. It demonstrates that autoworkers at the Big Three and auto parts companies cannot afford to passively “wait and see” what the UAW negotiates but must begin organizing now to oppose a sellout and wage a real fight for their demands.

Lear workers should press the initiative following their no vote and form a rank-and-file committee. Such a committee will provide a way for workers to draw up and fight for a list of demands based on what workers actually need. It will also allow workers at Lear to link up and coordinate with their brothers and sisters at Ford Chicago and other plants.

UAW president postures as Stellantis demands massive concessions

At a livestreamed UAW bargaining update Tuesday, Fain made no mention of the vote by Lear workers or the recent announcement by parts maker Forvia that it is closing its seating plant in Highland Park, Michigan, throwing 511 UAW members into the street.

Last week the UAW presented its so-called “members’ demands” to the auto companies, including the elimination of tiers in wages and benefits and “substantial wage increases.” This was detailed 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 on the list was the restoration of pensions and retiree health benefits for all workers.

In his comments Tuesday Fain professed outrage at the massive profits made by the Detroit automakers, \$21 billion in the first six months of 2023 alone, without acknowledging that this gargantuan cash haul was made possible through the concessions contracts negotiated by himself and other currently serving UAW leaders.

Stellantis management has responded to the UAW's demands by presenting a long list of provocative counter-proposals, making it clear that it has no intention of giving up a penny of its profits to meet workers' demands and is seeking further steep concessions. The demands issued by Stellantis, as reported by Fain, include the creation of new tiers, cuts to medical benefits and vacations, the elimination of caps on the employment of temp workers, the expansion of mandatory overtime, the right to re-open the contract and impose changes without a membership vote and the permanent closure of the assembly plant at Belvidere, Illinois.

Fain called the Stellantis demands "a slap in the face" and theatrically tossed a copy of the proposals into a trash can. The fact remains that the UAW leadership has no intention of waging a serious fight.

Fain's striking of a faux militant pose should fool no one. He is a long-serving UAW bureaucrat, endorsed the 2009 historic concessions contract at Chrysler as a member of the UAW's national bargaining committee, and is a man who rubbed shoulders with Dennis Williams, Gary Jones and other former top union officials convicted of corruption.

In what should be taken as a warning by workers at the Big Three, the same UAW official, Vice President Rich Boyer, who was in overall charge of the negotiations at Lear, is also the lead negotiator at Stellantis.

Boyer was a member of Fain's slate, backed by the Unite All Workers for Democracy "reform" caucus in the 2022 UAW national elections, which were marred by a massive suppression of the vote by the UAW bureaucracy, as documented by rank-and-file candidate Will Lehman. Turnout in the first round of the elections stood at just 9 percent.

One ongoing struggle that Fain did reference during his livestream was the strike by workers at Westrock Packaging in South Brunswick, New Jersey, now in their third month of a fight against concession demands. The fate of these workers exposes the phony posturing of Fain. The strike by 100 workers has been completely isolated by the UAW, and information about it largely blacked out by both the corporate media and UAW. Comparing Westrock to the upcoming fight at the Big Three, Fain had the gall to declare the UAW had the backs of these workers. About the company's calls for cuts to workers' health care, he blustered, "We are not going to allow it."

Fain's rhetoric is a desperate and risky attempt—from the standpoint of the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy—to deflect workers pent-up anger as he maneuvers with the auto companies and the Biden administration to impose the sellout contract Wall Street is demanding.

Fain theatrically warned automakers during his livestream, "If the Big Three companies don't start getting serious ... then, you know, come Sept. 14 we're going to have to see what happens. I don't think they're going to be happy with it."

However, the UAW has allowed Stellantis to impose mandatory

12-hour, 7-day work schedules at a number of key Stellantis factories without a protest in the lead-up to the contract deadline, allowing the company to build up its inventories to prepare for any possible strike.

Autoworkers cannot allow themselves to be caught by surprise by the inevitable betrayal Fain and the UAW bureaucracy will attempt to carry out. Preparations must be made now to organize on the shop floor to vote down the sellout that Fain and the UAW are preparing and wage a real fight for their demands.

Workers would do well to take a warning from the experience of 500 Clarios battery plant workers in Holland, Ohio, this spring. The workers voted down two UAW-negotiated sellout contracts before the UAW declared ratification on the third try after the Fain administration isolated the strike and enabled the Big Three to use batteries produced by scab labor at the plant.

The auto companies are clearly preparing for a ruthless, all-out battle. They have repeatedly declared their intention to impose on workers the cost of producing electric vehicles, which need far less labor to produce and presage a huge attack on jobs. A recent warning of the coming assault was the bankruptcy of Yellow Freight, which overnight threw 30,000 workers out of work.

Autoworkers must likewise prepare. This means expanding the network of rank-and-file committees to all the auto plants and to the parts supplier plants and other sections of workers nationally and globally.

Rank-and-file committees must disseminate information, expose the lies of the UAW and management, the corporate media and big business politicians.

The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), will assist workers in this struggle by fighting for a North America-wide strike to win what workers actually need, not what the corporations, the UAW or the Biden administration says is possible or acceptable.



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