

How autoworkers can win their demands in the Big Three-UAW contract fight

Marcus Day
9 August 2023

To discuss joining the autoworkers rank-and-file committee network, fill out the form at the end of this article. Sign up for text message updates on the Big Three contract fight by texting AUTO to (866) 847-1086.

An explosive mood of anger and militancy is emerging among autoworkers in the US, with Thursday marking just five weeks till the September 14 expiration of contracts between 150,000 members of the United Auto Workers and General Motors, Ford and Stellantis.

Workers are increasingly determined to fight not only against new attacks but to reverse concessions previously imposed with the support of the UAW bureaucracy. The past two years have seen a virtually uninterrupted series of overwhelming “no” votes by workers rejecting UAW-backed, pro-corporate contracts. In the latest, auto parts workers at the Lear seating plant in Hammond, Indiana, voted by 95 percent on Sunday against a sellout deal endorsed by the UAW. In the meeting before the contract vote, workers angrily confronted UAW officials and shouted demands for strike action.

Under these conditions, UAW President Shawn Fain announced last week the issues he said the UAW was proposing be included in the new Big Three contracts, including the elimination of tiers, the restoration of COLA, defined benefit pensions, the end of the abuse of temps, the reestablishment of retiree health care benefits and an increase to retirees’ income. According to subsequent media reports, the UAW is also said to have proposed a 46 percent wage increase and is “seeking” a 32-hour workweek at 40 hours’ pay.

While watered down in significant respects, the points proposed by Fain are largely plagiarized from a statement adopted by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, “What autoworkers need to win the 2023 Big Three contract battle,” and the demands it put forward, which have been circulated widely by workers on social media and in the plants since their publication in early July.

But what Fain and the UAW apparatus have entirely left out is what the rank-and-file committee statement explains: **how workers can actually fight for and win these demands.**

The UAW bureaucracy, sensing its weakness and isolation from the rank and file, clearly felt it had no choice but to respond defensively to rank-and-file workers’ demands and

present them as its own, in a desperate effort to head off an unmanageable rebellion and shore up whatever it can of its credibility. But with its back against the wall, the apparatus is playing with fire, raising expectations that it will inevitably betray.

What is required is for this rank-and-file rebellion to be deepened and for workers to press the offensive.

No confidence can be placed in Fain’s administration to fight for anything. It has already demonstrated in its sellout of the Clarios battery workers strike that it is dedicated to enforcing the interests of the companies. It would be a fatal mistake for workers to adopt a “wait and see” approach to what the bureaucracy will do.

An enormous and unrelenting struggle is required. Everything workers need will be bitterly resisted by the companies, as is already evident in the response of Stellantis this week, demanding wholesale new concessions. As the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network explained, “Autoworkers will win this fight, not through appeals to company executives and big business politicians, but by means of *hard and uncompromising class struggle.*”

To put this fight for workers’ demands on a serious footing, the following immediate measures are needed:

- **Raise strike pay to \$750 a week.** The UAW’s \$825 million strike fund, built with workers’ dues, must be deployed to adequately sustain workers on strike. Additional resources must be freed up through the immediate reduction of the six-figure salaries of hundreds of bureaucrats at Solidarity House and the sale of UAW assets that serve no purpose to rank-and-file workers.

- **Detailed reports on, and rank-and-file oversight over, all negotiations.** Workers cannot simply take Fain and the UAW negotiators at their word, given the long record of lies and bait-and-switch tactics employed by the union apparatus in collaboration with management. The rank and file have a right to know every word and document exchanged between management and union officials, in complete detail.

- **Prepare for an all-out nationwide strike across the auto industry on September 15.** Veteran auto industry analysts have floated the possibility that Fain will call out only an isolated few engine plants, which may disrupt production but

not require the UAW to pay strike benefits for all its members—an unmistakable sign that a betrayal was being prepared. For this struggle to succeed, all UAW members across the auto industry—at the Big Three and in the parts sector, where workers confront some of the most wretched sweatshop conditions—must be involved.

Workers can expect the UAW bureaucracy to resist these and other necessary measures every step of the way. Therefore, everything depends on the mobilization and initiative of rank-and-file workers, independently of the UAW bureaucracy.

Rank-and-file committees must be established in every factory and workplace, on each shift and in each department. These committees will provide a means for workers to share information across plants and companies, coordinate collective actions and unleash the tremendous social power of the working class.

Finally, along with new organizational structures, a new political strategy is needed.

- **The struggle workers are engaged in requires their complete independence from the Democratic and Republican parties,** which are the political representatives of Wall Street and big business.

Fain has falsely promoted Democratic senators and congressional representatives as “having our [workers’] back,” knowing full well that the same politicians voted to ban a railroad strike last year and impose a contract workers opposed.

The UAW president has also repeatedly held private meetings with Biden and top officials in his administration, in what can only be understood as a conspiracy against workers, whose principal aim is to contain and suppress opposition as the White House escalates war with Russia and prepares for war with China.

- **To fight the giant transnational corporations such as GM, Ford and Stellantis, workers must adopt an international strategy.**

Workers throughout the auto industry are objectively connected in a vast global web of production and division of labor. In Canada, 20,000 workers at the Big Three see their contracts expire on September 18 and similarly confront the collusion between the Unifor union bureaucracy and management.

The logic of the struggle workers are engaged in will pose the necessity for any walkout to expand internationally, across North America and beyond, in order to defeat the efforts of the companies to increase production at their plants in other countries and break a strike.

The real allies of autoworkers in the United States are not Biden, Bernie Sanders or other Democratic and Republican politicians but rather the innumerable workers across America

and around the world who are moving into struggle.

In the US, 76,000 actors and screenwriters have been waging a determined strike for months; in Germany, tens of thousands of Volkswagen workers face the threat of mass layoffs and cost cuts backed by management and the IG Metall union; and in Turkey, 150,000 autoworkers and metalworkers are seeking to overturn concessions in contract negotiations this fall. These and other struggles must be united and made the starting point of a counteroffensive of the working class to secure its interests.

Workers will be subjected to relentless propaganda from the companies and the media that their demands are “unreasonable” or “unrealistic” and would prevent the companies from being “competitive.”

But the last thing which should be of any concern to workers is the defense of corporate profits. The tremendous wealth that has been accrued to the companies’ richest shareholders was produced by the workers and belongs to them.

The ruling class and all its appendages—from the media to the UAW apparatus—are above all terrified by the growing support for rank-and-file committees, organizational structures outside the control of the bureaucracy.

Despite all the efforts of the UAW apparatus to suppress the vote and exclude workers’ participation in its national elections last year, nearly 5,000 voted for Will Lehman, a socialist and rank-and-file worker at Mack Trucks. Lehman won substantial support for his program of abolishing the UAW bureaucracy, transferring power to workers on the shopfloor and building a mass movement of workers globally as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The fight for rank-and-file power is acquiring evermore burning relevance and urgency. With five weeks remaining to the expiration of the UAW-Big Three contracts, there is no time to lose. Every day must be utilized for workers to prepare and organize, develop their independent initiative, not be taken by surprise when the UAW bureaucracy inevitably betrays the struggle, and instead mobilize the full strength of the working class to win what workers need.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact