

Biden's intervention in the UAW-Big Three contracts: A warning to autoworkers

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With one month to go until contracts expire for 150,000 autoworkers at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis, the Biden administration is intervening in an effort to subvert the enormous rank-and-file opposition to a sellout.

Both Biden and the United Auto Workers union bureaucracy are acutely sensitive to the growth of autoworkers' militant determination to reverse decades of UAW-enforced concessions and win major advances in wages, benefits and working conditions.

Biden, fearing that the administration of UAW President Shawn Fain may not have the situation under control, issued a statement Monday calling on the companies and the UAW apparatus to work together to hammer out an agreement, one that he knows will contain massive attacks on workers.

The statement is a further warning to autoworkers: As long as the contract process remains in the hands of the UAW bureaucracy and the Biden administration, the only possible outcome will be historic attacks on workers' jobs and living standards. To prevent this, it is necessary for workers to expand the network of rank-and-file committees under their control and prepare for an all-out struggle.

In his statement, Biden writes, "As the Big Three auto companies and the United Auto Workers come together — one month before the expiration of their contract — to negotiate a new agreement, I want to be clear about where I stand. I'm asking all sides to work together to forge a fair agreement."

By "all sides" working together, Biden, in fact, means only one side, those entities representing the interests of the corporations—management and the UAW officialdom—with workers to be completely excluded from the process.

In recent weeks, the UAW has sought to get ahead of a rank-and-file revolt by claiming it is calling for a series of popular measures, including the elimination of tiers, the restoration of cost-of-living raises and pensions, and substantial wage increases, along with other contract provisions it had previously given up. Fain's administration lifted its supposed proposals from a widely circulated statement of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee

Network, which, in contrast to the UAW, outlined a strategy and initiatives for rank-and-file workers to fight for and win their demands.

The companies have responded by making clear they will bitterly resist restoring any past concessions for workers. Stellantis has reportedly demanded sweeping new concessions, with its executives making a number of provocative statements threatening workers' jobs.

At bottom, the conflicts between corporate executives and the UAW bureaucracy are of a largely theatrical and relative character. The Big Three's executives know that Fain and his lieutenants have worked with management to enforce concessions in the past and will do so again.

Nevertheless, Biden is no doubt nervous that the public "war of words" threatens to inflame workers' anger and more deeply solidify rank-and-file opposition. The president is particularly concerned that a revolt by autoworkers would galvanize a broader movement in the working class, upending US imperialism's plans to escalate its war with Russia and prepare a war against China.

Thus, Biden urges management and the UAW bureaucracy to redouble their efforts to reach a deal and impose massive job cuts and other attacks on workers. Of course, Biden cannot state this openly, so he must resort to double talk, vague allusions and lies.

First, Biden states that the "auto companies should honor the right to organize," by which he means that the corporations should partner with the UAW bureaucracy, which has functioned as a reliable tool of management for decades, and welcome its presence at new electric vehicle (EV) plants. Later, Biden says that "the UAW deserves a contract that sustains the middle class." If this means anything, it is that the companies should continue to support the upper-middle class layers that constitute the UAW bureaucracy, which has hundreds of officials receiving six-figure salaries.

Second, what does Biden mean by an agreement which is "fair," a word used three times in the statement?

To understand his definition of the term, workers have

only to recall the savage restructuring of the auto industry under the Obama-Biden administration. The 2009 contracts demanded by the Obama administration entailed the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, the decimation of unemployment protections, and the elimination of cost-of-living raises. Wages for all new-hires were cut in half, and pensions were ended through the expansion of the tier system.

These historic attacks on workers were carried out with the crucial assistance of the UAW bureaucracy, including Fain, who voted in favor of the concessions as a member of the UAW-Chrysler national negotiating committee. In return, the UAW apparatus was given a controlling stake in Chrysler and billions of dollars in stock at GM and Ford.

In his statement, Biden presents the transition to EV production as a “win-win opportunity” for the companies and workers, saying:

It should enable workers to make good wages and benefits to support their families, while leading us into a future where America is leading the way in reducing vehicle emissions and producing autos that will successfully compete domestically and globally.

But there is no outcome that is a “win-win” for both the corporate oligarchy and the autoworkers, and Biden knows it. The colossal profits of the Big Three—a quarter of a trillion over the past decade—have been predicated upon a savage intensification of workers’ exploitation.

Biden’s references to “good wages and benefits” are worthless window dressing. The president’s overriding priority is a restructuring of the auto industry that will enable US-based corporations to “successfully compete domestically and globally.” In the frenzied capitalist competition to dominate EV markets and technologies, such an outcome can only be achieved through the destruction of tens of thousands or more jobs, brutal labor cost cuts and other attacks.

The final paragraph of the statement makes clear Biden’s commitment to plant shutdowns and job cuts. While cynically claiming that the companies should “take every possible step to avoid painful plant closings,” Biden then states “that when transitions [i.e., plant closures] are needed,” they should be “fair” and “look to retool, reboot, and rehire in the same factories and communities at comparable wages, while giving existing workers the first shot to fill those jobs.”

This is a recipe for a new wave of plant closures, which will further devastate working class regions such as

Rockford, Illinois, where Stellantis has idled its nearby Belvidere assembly plant. To the extent that any plants reopen, it will be with a far-reduced workforce and substandard wages and benefits.

Biden, the self-described “most pro-union president in US history,” has relied on the union bureaucracies to contain and suppress a growing movement of the working class during his time in office. At the same time, the White House has repeatedly acted to shore up the legitimacy of the UAW apparatus and the administration of Shawn Fain in particular. Biden’s Department of Labor has sought to whitewash the UAW’s fraudulent, antidemocratic elections held in 2022-2023, rejecting out of hand evidence of widespread disenfranchisement compiled by rank-and-file candidate Will Lehman.

Biden’s administration has also coordinated closely with the Teamsters, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and other unions to block strikes by workers on the railroads, at UPS and on the West Coast docks and impose corporate demands for below-inflation wage increases.

Where the class struggle has threatened to break out of the control of the union bureaucracies—as among rail workers last year—Biden has shown he is willing to use the full powers of the capitalist state against workers, as he did when he worked with congressional Democrats and Republicans to ban a rail strike and impose a contract against the workers’ will.

To defeat the conspiracy being prepared against them by the companies, the UAW bureaucracy, and the Biden administration, it is imperative that workers organize and deepen their rebellion, through the expansion of the network of rank-and-file committees. These committees will fight to abolish the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy, transfer power to the shop floor, and launch a counteroffensive for workers’ genuine demands.

An indispensable element for waging such a struggle is an understanding that workers must establish their independence from the Biden administration, the Democratic Party and all political representatives of their class enemies.



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