

US autoworkers vote by 97 percent for strike authorization, expressing overwhelming determination to reverse UAW-backed concessions

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25 August 2023

Join the weekly autoworkers rank-and-file online forum on the 2023 Detroit Three-UAW contract fight, Sundays at 3 p.m. Eastern. Register here to attend.

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Workers at the Detroit Three automakers have voted by 97 percent to authorize strike action in an overwhelming expression of determination by workers to win major advances in wages, benefits and working conditions. The result was announced by the United Auto Workers on Friday, with just three weeks remaining until the expiration of contracts covering 150,000 workers at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis.

The near-unanimous strike vote is part of an ongoing eruption of class struggle internationally, from the months-long strike by tens of thousands of writers and actors in the US, to strikes in the airline and transport industries in a number of European countries. Struggles are looming among autoworkers on multiple continents, including the 150,000 Detroit Three workers in the US; another 18,000 autoworkers in Canada whose contracts expire September 18; tens of thousands of VW workers in Germany and other countries who are fighting against mass job cuts; and 150,000 autoworkers and metal workers in Turkey, whose contracts also expire in September.

Autoworkers in the US are determined to reverse decades of UAW-enforced concessions, seeking the elimination of tiers and part time work, a massive pay raise and the restoration of pensions, under conditions where the auto companies are making fabulous profits off their labor. The auto companies are no less determined to impose mass job cuts and devastating concessions as they transition to electric vehicle production, and they are again relying on the pro-company UAW apparatus to contain and demobilize the intense opposition built up in the working class.

In this vein, the UAW apparatus has held a series of “practice pickets” outside auto plants led by Fain and other top UAW bureaucrats, accompanied by militant-sounding rhetoric criticizing excessive corporate profits and bloated executive pay. At the same time, the UAW is parading politicians from the big business Democratic Party as the allies of workers in one of the surest signs that the union bureaucracy is preparing a betrayal.

At Mack Assembly in Detroit, a few dozen bureaucrats, Democratic Party operatives, including Democratic Congresswoman and

Democratic Socialists of America member Rashida Tlaib, and a small number of workers marched around an almost empty strip mall parking lot for about 20 minutes.

At a rally at UAW Region 1 headquarters last Sunday, the UAW invited Democratic Congresswoman Haley Stevens as a featured speaker. Stevens was a member of the Obama-Biden administration’s 2009 Auto Task Force, which oversaw a brutal restructuring of the auto industry, destroying thousands of jobs, slashing new-hires’ wages in half, and eliminating cost-of-living raises, among other major concessions.

The Teamsters bureaucracy at UPS carried out a similar “strike ready” campaign, including various stunts such as rallies and practice pickets, in the run-up to the vote earlier this month on a sellout agreement that met none of workers’ basic demands. The Teamsters claimed a lopsided vote in favor of ratification under a cloud of suspicion among rank-and-file workers.

The reality is that nothing can be won without an all-out fight and a direct confrontation with the Biden administration, but that is the last thing that Fain and the UAW bureaucracy want. Instead, Fain, with the help of pseudo-left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America, is attempting to lull workers, telling them to put their trust in a UAW leadership that has betrayed again and again.

To prevent the imposition of yet another sellout agreement, workers must prepare now by building the network of rank-and-file committees in every auto plant. Workers seeking a way to fight should participate in the online meeting Sunday, “How autoworkers can win their demands in the 2023 UAW contract fight.”

Fain: Biden is not involved in the contracts

In a livestream announcing the strike authorization Friday morning, UAW President Fain again sought to present the union bureaucracy as leading a fight against the companies.

Fain criticized the poverty-level pay of new-hires and temp workers and the elimination of pensions. He also lamented, hypocritically, the terrible impact on family life of the forced seven-day, 12-hour work schedule now in place at many Stellantis plants under the “critical

status” provisions of the UAW contract.

In fact, when Stellantis announced it was imposing “critical status” at Warren Truck, Jefferson Assembly and several other Detroit-area plants, Fain said nothing and did nothing. All the ills decry by the UAW president—poverty wage levels, forced overtime and elimination of pensions—were contained in contracts either negotiated or supported by Fain and virtually the entire current UAW leadership.

Fain—the former co-director of the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center—went on to posture as an opponent of the policy of union-management cooperation that he and fellow UAW bureaucrats have pursued for decades, with disastrous results for the lives and living standards of autoworkers. The joint training programs were the conduit for both illegal bribes of union officials and “legal” transfers of huge sums of corporate cash to the union apparatus.

In response to a comment during the livestream opposing Biden’s intervention in the contract talks, Fain lyingly claimed that the president was not involved. In fact, just over a week earlier, Fain had issued a groveling letter thanking Biden for his supposed “support” in the contract process.

On Friday afternoon, Biden told reporters that he was talking to UAW leaders, adding, “I think there should be a circumstance where workers are displaced and replaced by new jobs, first choice should go to UAW members and the salaries should be commensurate.”

This is in line with the demand by Fain that the UAW be installed as bargaining agent at the new battery plants being built by the Detroit car companies. As the poverty level “interim” deal at Ultium Cells demonstrates, the UAW is willing to drop its demand for “commensurate wages” as long as it can continue to collect union dues from the workforce.

Fain went on to make an appeal to the Biden administration to not let “labor be left out of the equation,” insisting, “Labor has to have a seat at the table.”

Indeed, every action of the Fain leadership is being coordinated with the Biden administration. Both sides are equally determined to strangle the militancy of workers and impose a management-dictated contract as the US escalates the war against Russia and prepares for war against China.

The promotion by Fain of the Biden administration, which illegalized a strike by railroad workers and imposed a hated contract on their backs, is the clearest demonstration of the anti-worker character of the whole UAW apparatus and its plans to impose a sellout contract.

While the UAW’s leadership is in daily contact with the Biden administration on the status of negotiations, the Democrats are doing all in their power to restore a vestige of credibility to the corrupt UAW apparatus.

Biden’s Department of Labor has sought to whitewash the fraudulent UAW election that installed Shawn Fain in office, which entailed the disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of autoworkers by the UAW apparatus, as documented in a series of official protests by socialist autoworker Will Lehman, who ran for UAW president against both Ray Curry and Fain and received 5,000 votes. Lehman has sued the US Labor Department to demand a rerun of the elections.

During the livestream, Fain refused to respond to a question by Lehman about protests by workers at the Flint General Motors plant after management, with the acquiescence of the UAW, kept assembly lines running Thursday night in the midst of a tornado warning issued by the National Weather Service.

The nervousness and fear of the UAW apparatus at the anger of autoworkers, of which the massive strike vote is just one indication, is shown by the fact that the UAW has publicized a number of popular proposals, including a 40 percent pay increase, the abolition of tiers, COLA, pensions, and a shorter workweek with no loss in pay.

A series of recent actions by the UAW belie the claim that the UAW will actually fight for any of workers’ demands.

In opening his remarks, Fain boasted of the “interim” agreement just reached with Ultium Cells, a joint venture between General Motors and LG Energy Solutions to make batteries in Lordstown, Ohio, the site of a now closed GM factory. Far from the UAW negotiating pay parity with the national UAW auto contract, the deal raises the pay of Ultium workers, who recently joined the UAW, to the still poverty level of just over \$20 an hour.

The deal is a further indication that the UAW is abandoning its promise that Ultium workers would be covered under the national auto contracts, and instead will be established as a new tier of workers with substandard pay and benefits.

Further exposing Fain’s bluster, just this past Sunday workers at the Lear Seating plant in Hammond, Indiana voted down a second sellout contract negotiated by the UAW that would leave their wages at the poverty level and greatly increase health care costs. Fain and the UAW International have remained completely silent on the Lear workers’ rebellion, seeking to isolate the workers and string them out on repeated contract extensions.

Earlier this year the UAW sold out a powerful strike by 500 Clarios battery workers in Holland, Ohio by ordering UAW members at the Big Three to install scab batteries produced by strikebreakers hired by management.

To prevent a betrayal of their struggle, immediate steps should be taken by autoworkers.

Workers must demand and fight for the right to oversee contract negotiations and be provided with daily updates on all information exchanged by the UAW and management. Strike pay should be raised to \$750 a week and preparations made to strike the entire Big Three.

The fight must be expanded to Canada, Mexico and beyond. Workers must expose and denounce all attempts to pit US workers against their brother and sister workers in other countries.

To coordinate and lead this fight, rank-and-file committees must be established at each plant and warehouse, linking up with the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter and the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network are co-hosting a meeting this Sunday at 3 p.m. Eastern on how autoworkers can win their demands in the 2023 contract struggle. Register here to attend.



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