

“We showed them we’re ready to fight”

Autoworkers speak on massive strike vote as UAW keeps workers in the dark about company concession demands

Jerry White
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Autoworkers have been energized by the massive strike vote cast by United Auto Workers members across the country last week. According to the UAW, 97 percent of workers at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis voted to authorize a strike. Contracts covering 150,000 autoworkers in the US expire in less than three weeks, on September 14 at 11:59 p.m.

The Canadian auto union, Unifor, announced Sunday night that workers at the Big Three automakers had also voted overwhelmingly to take strike action, with 98.6 percent authorizing a walkout. The contracts covering 18,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in Canada expire at 11:59 p.m. on September 18.

The massive strike votes in the US and Canada give a sense of the explosive anger that has built up in the working class throughout the world due to the decades-high inflation of the past two years, the terrible impact of the ongoing pandemic and the massive redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top of society. The auto companies have made profits of more than \$22 billion in the first half of 2023 and over \$300 billion since the bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler in 2009.

“We showed them that we’re ready to fight,” a Stellantis worker at the Toledo Jeep Complex in northern Ohio with 10 years on the job told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “There are all these tactics to divide us in different tiers, and there are lot of SEs [supplemental employees, a category of temporary worker] in our plant. That’s not okay. It took me eight years to get to top pay, and some of these workers are making half as much as we are and they are working six, seven days a week, 10 hours a day. If they are rolled over to full-time, they’re taking a \$4 an hour pay cut. That makes me mad.

“When it’s contract time, the media publicizes what we’re making in wages, profit-sharing and everything else, but we’re not allowed to know what’s being negotiated behind closed doors.

This has to stop. Everything should be livestreamed. This is our lives.”

He continued, “We get letters from Stellantis executives complaining about absenteeism. But they never say what is behind attendance problems. I’m working six 10-hour days, and when I come home my hands are swollen to twice their size. I take Motrin and ice my hands every day. I had a co-worker whose son was hit by a car and injured, and the supervisor wouldn’t give her the time off to care for him. They want us to live and breathe this place. But I’m a mom and wife, not just an autoworker.”

A Ford Chicago Assembly worker noted similarly, “We need a better quality of life, not living in here just to make a living.”

All workers need better working conditions, he continued. “Not just me, everybody. And we’re fighting for the new people coming in, cause that’s the next generation.”

A temporary part-time (TPT) worker at the Stellantis Warren truck assembly plant said everyone on her shift, which got off at 3 a.m., went down to the union hall and voted to strike. “I’m a TPT and I’m sticking with my sisters and brothers. I’m all for the strike. I just hope that they all do the right thing. We get paid \$16-17 an hour and do just as much as all the full timers. I hope we all get together and fight—and get what we want.”

A worker at Ford’s Dearborn Stamping plant in Michigan described his experiences as a temp and the support he received from more experienced workers. “When I started working in the Ford Flat Rock plant as a TPT I spoke with a worker who told me what it used to be like. After 90 days you got hired in as a full-time worker and made the same as the guy next to you. Everybody was pretty much on the same page and able to make enough money to do the things they wanted to. By the time I got there, they implemented the tier system and that completely dismantled the structure they had built up for years.

“I was working next to a guy with 20 years, and he didn’t know what I was making. The company can disrespect the TPTs, they can take them off the job and throw them anywhere. I was making \$200 a week for four years, working two or three days a week. Thankfully you had older guys in there to back you up.

“The union says they cannot do anything about it. The tier

system is something that's ripped away from what the UAW once stood for, forever. I understand what the temps are going through.

"It is time we really spend our time talking to each other, communicating. I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for an older person, a veteran to tell me what was going on and how it should be. We got to keep going at this. It'll be a fight, but we have to do it."

Other Ford Chicago workers also spoke about what workers are striving for.

A veteran worker with 24 years said, "More money. Cost-of-living [raises]. No more two tier."

"Everybody needs a pension. We're breaking our back up in here. Why not?"

A temporary full-time (TFT) worker at Ford Chicago added that workers need "more emergency time, cause TFTs, we don't get time to take off. We're scheduled to be here or we get disciplinary action [if we're not]."

"Fain is using smoke and mirrors to make it look like he's got our back"

UAW President Shawn Fain has adopted a militant pose to forestall an all-out rebellion by rank-and-file workers angered over decades of union-backed concessionary agreements. But behind the scenes, Fain is in discussions with the Biden administration and the auto executives over how to force workers to pay the costs of the transition to electric vehicles and ensure the continued flow of massive profits to shareholders.

The pro-corporate policies of the UAW bureaucracy under Fain have continued, in the betrayal of the 40-day strike by Clarios battery workers, the efforts to force Indiana Lear workers to accept more concessions, and the deal Fain has reached to maintain poverty wages at the GM-LG joint venture Ultium battery plant in Lordstown, Ohio.

"We are ready to go on strike but there is a lot of work to do," a Stellantis worker with 10 years at the Toledo Jeep Complex told the WSW. "We're supposed to be getting updates but everything from the UAW president is vague. The membership needs real information, not bullet points. What are the companies saying about our demands?"

"The UAW got us into this predicament. Now Fain is using smoke and mirrors to make it look like he's got our back. The rank and file are going to have to fight to get back everything they took from us."

In his comments on Friday announcing the strike vote, Fain dodged any questions from workers about the demands being made by Stellantis and other companies and the details of what is being discussed with management. "We're still in the bargaining process," he said. "I know the bargaining committee has been working real hard through a lot of the non-economics, we've been talking some economics, and we're getting ready to get more in depth this week with the Big Three companies."

In response to a question about the UAW's plans for strike

action, Fain pleaded for workers to "trust" the UAW leadership. "I know it's hard to have faith in the union leadership because there's been so much mistrust in all these years," he said without answering workers' questions. "I'm asking you to trust us as we map out this plan, as things progress. We have to be all united and be together. We're all in this fight together. Any scenario we play out—we just ask people to have discipline, listen to your local leaderships—the national departments will be communicating with your local leaders—and we'll map out steps we have to take in the event we have to take action."

But the reality is that rank-and-file workers and the UAW bureaucracy are not "in this fight together."

The UAW apparatus is planning to agree to—if it has not already—massive job cuts and wage concessions in exchange for securing its position and dues income in the new, low-paying EV plants. It is also looking to get federal funding for "retraining" displaced workers for low-paying jobs, similar to the money-making business operated by the United Mine Workers Career Centers, Inc. in the devastated Appalachian coal fields.

The only way that the jobs and livelihoods of workers can be defended is by mobilizing the full strength of the working class against the corporations and the government, and advancing a program that utilizes technological advances to lessen the physical burden on workers and shorten the workweek with no loss of pay. The allies of workers are neither the big business Democratic nor Republican Parties, but rather the millions of workers in the US and other countries who are similarly fighting low wages and degrading working conditions.

Autoworkers must organize now to prevent the sabotage of their struggle by the UAW bureaucracy. The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committees Network must be expanded to break the information blackout by the UAW apparatus, establish lines of communication and unify workers across all shifts, tiers, factories and companies, and across borders in the US, Mexico and around the world.



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