

Autoworkers prepare to strike as UAW president offers no strategy to fight wage cutting and EV jobs massacre

Jerry White
1 September 2023

Join the next online public meeting, “A strategy to stop the EV jobs bloodbath!” this Sunday, September 3, at 3:00 p.m. Eastern. Register [here](#) to attend.

Sign up for text message updates on the Detroit Three contract fight by texting AUTO to (866) 847-1086.

With the September 14 contract expiration deadline quickly approaching, there is broad and growing support for an all-out strike against General Motors, Ford and Stellantis.

“We’re ready to strike,” a young second tier worker and single mother at Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit told the WSW. “It’s sad that I’m helping to create vehicle after vehicle for Stellantis, and with me only making \$15.78, I can’t even afford to fix my own car to get to work. The profit they bring in off one Dodge Ram pickup I help create could buy me a new vehicle.”

“We are living check to check. I am full-time, and I still can’t make it,” another Warren Truck worker said. “Temps have to work too long until they get to full time. The company makes billions of dollars, and we get crumbs.” Asked if workers were prepared to fight, she said, “We are not going to roll over and take anything they offer.” Another worker added, “We build the vehicles,” and if the workers walk out, “their billions are going to dry up.”

In a bid to contain the militancy of workers, UAW President Shawn Fain has advanced a series of popular proposals, including a 40 percent wage increase, the abolition of tiers and the restoration COLA and other concessions the UAW gave up. But Fain and the UAW bureaucracy have no intention, let alone strategy, to obtain workers’ demands.

At the same time, the UAW has deliberately downplayed what is the most important issue looming over the contract battle: the plans by the auto companies to use the transition to electric vehicles to destroy the jobs of hundreds of thousands of autoworkers.

Behind the kabuki theatre of “negotiations,” the UAW bureaucracy has already agreed to massive job cuts. If Fain and other UAW officials are demanding anything, it is only the preservation of the bureaucracy’s own interests as it helps the automakers slash jobs and create a much smaller, lower-paid and highly exploited workforce in the new EV battery and component plants.

During a Facebook Live event Thursday, Fain admitted that the automakers were determined to extract even greater concessions from workers to fund their EV transition. GM and Stellantis had not even responded to the union’s proposals, Fain said, while Ford rejected them out of hand.

Union negotiators, he said, proposed that all temporary workers be

given the opportunity to convert to full-time positions after 90 days, that they be paid no less than 85 percent of the top rate and receive full-time health care and retirement benefits and profit-sharing checks.

In response, he said, “Ford has proposed that there be no cap on the use of temporary workers. The company has proposed that they receive less than 60 percent of the top wage rate” and that “they be given second-tier health care and no retirement benefits.” Even more provocatively, he reported, “under Ford’s proposal, the company would have the right to transition to an entirely temporary workforce over time, and we would have no say in this.”

In terms of wages, he said, Ford was offering 9 percent increases over the life of the four-year agreement and refusing to restore COLA. Instead it is offering a one-time bonus. It also rejected any increase in pension payments to retirees, who have not seen an increase in 17 years.

The UAW president feigned outrage, dumping the proposal into a trash can, before saying, “We’re fed up living in a world that values profits over people... seeing the rich get richer, while the rest of us continue to just scrape by. We’re fed up with corporate greed, and together, we’re going to fight like hell to change it.”

This is all hot air. Fain—who has a salary upwards of \$300,000—and the rest of the highly paid bureaucrats “negotiating” this contract are not “scraping by.” The army of International, regional, and local union officials live quite well from workers’ dues and the handouts they get from the companies. In the union’s last filing with the US Labor Department, the UAW reported \$1.1 billion in assets and more than \$20 million in direct company transfers through joint union-management schemes.

For all the huffing and puffing, Fain outlined no strategy to fight. Instead, he reiterated previous statements that “our goal is not to strike but to bargain a fair contract.” Stating his confidence that “we can get there” and reach an agreement, he added, the companies “had better buckle down and get serious” or “we’re going to show them what getting serious is all about come September 14.”

He announced that the UAW had filed unfair labor practices charges against GM and Stellantis with the National Labor Relations Board because they were dragging out negotiations. If this toothless measure has any meaning, it only would be to create conditions for the UAW to call a limited “Hollywood strike” of a few days and then call it off after companies agreed to “bargain in good faith.” This would allow workers to blow off steam while doing as little damage as possible to the companies.

The companies are adamant in their opposition to workers’

demands. But if the company comes back with minor adjustments, for example, a large upfront pay increase, and other low-cost gestures, the UAW bureaucracy would announce it had achieved a “historic victory.”

Fain made a passing reference to EVs, saying Ford was “planning to move some of our powertrain work to dangerous low-paying non-union battery jobs outside of Ford. In fact, Ford’s currently investing billions of dollars in companies that are not Ford, and in a workforce that is not the UAW, and they are receiving billions of dollars in our taxpayer money to fund and support this race to the bottom.”

Far from proposing an all-out fight to against plant closings and layoffs, the UAW bureaucracy has been lobbying the Biden administration to pressure the auto companies to allow the UAW to “organize” the low-paid EV battery workers—in reality, to extract dues from them while concluding sellout agreements as it does everywhere else. The White House, in turn, is looking to the UAW to prevent a strike that would disrupt its increasingly aggressive economic and military measures against China, including securing supplies of lithium and other resources needed for automotive and military purposes.

On Thursday, the Biden administration announced another \$15.5 billion in Department of Energy (DOE) grants and loans to the automakers for EV production. The White House presented this as a “job creation” measure, giving incentives to projects “that are likely to retain collective bargaining agreements” and adopting the UAW’s rhetoric about a “just transition to EVs” without mentioning the likelihood of “painful plant closures” as it has done in previous announcements.

Fain dropped any of his previous criticisms of handouts to the rich and said the measure “echoes the UAW’s call for strong labor standards tied to all taxpayer funding that goes to auto and manufacturing companies.” He continued, “This new policy makes clear to employers that the EV transition must include strong union partnerships with the high pay and safety standards that generations of UAW members have fought for and won.”

He claimed that the grants and loans give shuttered plants at Belvidere, Illinois, and Romeo, Michigan, “a chance for federal support to ensure those jobs and communities are protected. The UAW looks forward to continue working with the Biden Administration to ensure a just transition for the auto workers in this country.”

In reality, the money will not protect any jobs. It is designed to incentivize the corporations to collaborate with the UAW and other union bureaucracies as the industry guts tens of thousands of jobs and demands sweeping concessions to reopen previously closed plants.

Stop the EV jobs bloodbath

In its statement issued Thursday, “Stop the EV jobs bloodbath,” the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) declared: “The UAW bureaucracy speaks vaguely about a ‘just transition’ but is hiding the sobering reality from the membership: This once-in-a-century industry transition threatens to eliminate half or more than half of all auto jobs in the US in the next five to 10 years, according to industry reports and research by experts.”

The statement calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees,

educate their coworkers about what the transition to EV means and why it should be carried out in the interests of the working class, not the CEOs, shareholders and affluent UAW bureaucrats.

It outlines a series of demands that workers must fight for, including:

- Immediate release of the list of planned plant closures!
- Not a single job loss or plant closure in the transition to EV!
- If EVs require less labor time to produce, then reduce hours and increase pay!
- Unite across borders to prevent a race to the bottom!
- Place the auto industry under social ownership subject to democratic worker control!

Supporters of the IWA-RFC distributed the statement and spoke to Warren Truck workers about this fight. “It’s going to be a battle, just like with the actors and the writers who are dealing with AI. These companies are cutting jobs, they’re not thinking about other people’s livelihoods,” said one worker. Denouncing the plans of the companies to reduce autoworkers to the level of low-paid gig workers, he said, “No job security, you pay for your own healthcare, and it costs more to do on your own. It’s not a solid job.”

Another Warren Truck worker said, “If you guys have the technology, we’ll do it for 32 hours at 40 hours pay, and we’ll probably do it better than your machines and quicker.”

A Toledo Jeep worker said, “Biden is backing the EVs, and we’re using our own tax dollars to put people out of work and paying for our own demise. Climate change is real, man-made, but we can’t rush into creating new kinds of waste either like burying a whole bunch of batteries underground.

“They talk about creating thousands of new jobs, but they are not going to be paying anything. In the battery plants, you work with a lot of chemicals and carcinogens. It’s a dangerous industry, and workers deserve more than \$15 an hour.

“I’m all for technology that we can work alongside with. But as far as using them trying to replace us, it is going to get to a point no humans will be working, and workers will not be able to afford anything. They say EVs are going to be saving all this money by opening new battery factories that are paying less. But is that going to drive down the cost of the vehicle? They’re still going to charge disgusting sticker prices like the EVs we make, which cost \$70,000. Who can afford a \$600 a month car payment?”

Speaking on the contract battle, he added, “Everybody is expecting certain things, and if those don’t come to fruition, then they will listen and support the rank-and-file committees.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact