

# On Labor Day in Detroit, UAW and Democratic strikebreakers conspire to block fight by autoworkers

**Shannon Jones****4 September 2023**

Labor Day events were held in Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and other cities Monday under conditions of a rising tide of strikes and militancy among workers, including the months-long strike by screenwriters and actors and the upcoming battle of 170,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the US and Canada.

Although there is widespread support for a united struggle by all sections of the working class, the events did not attract large numbers of rank-and-file workers. In Detroit, there was a turnout of only a few thousand even though the strike deadline for autoworkers is less than 10 days away and the Motor City remains the center of the North American auto industry, with tens of thousands of auto and auto parts workers.

Far from offering workers any strategy to fight the efforts of the global automakers to use the transition to electric vehicle (EV) production to destroy tens if not hundreds of thousands of jobs in the US alone, United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain used the event to promote the UAW bureaucracy's alliance with the Democratic Party. Among the keynote speakers were Congresswoman Haley Stevens, a member of the Obama-Biden administration's Auto Task Force, which oversaw the slashing of autoworkers' jobs and wages during the 2009 GM and Chrysler bankruptcy restructuring.

In Philadelphia, President Biden used the Labor Day event to tout his support for unions, in reality the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracy, as he launched his campaign for a second term in 2024. Speaking before about 2,000 at the Philadelphia Convention Center, Biden repeated his now familiar mantra, "I'm proud to be the most pro-union president, according to the experts, in American history."

This from a president who has presided over a further drastic erosion of workers' living standards, agreeing to huge cuts in social spending to fund the war against Russia in Ukraine. Assembled union leaders feted Biden despite his role in banning the strike by 110,000 rail workers last year and imposing a contract they did not want.

After the event, Biden told reporters he did not expect an auto strike, indicating his confidence that the UAW bureaucracy could keep a lid on the explosive opposition of rank-and-file workers. The president said he is "not worried about a strike," adding "it's not going to happen."

Fain, who is no doubt in daily discussions with Biden administration officials, feigned shock over the president's remarks, declaring, "He must know something we don't know, maybe the auto companies are planning on walking in and giving us our demands." He added, "Our intent is not to strike, our intent is to get a fair contract."

This exchange was a piece of political theatre designed to throw dust

in the eyes of autoworkers. In fact, Fain and Biden are walking in lockstep, determined to sabotage the fight of autoworkers to regain decades of concessions and impose an employer-friendly contract that will impose the cost of the transition to electric vehicles on the backs of workers.

The small size of the Detroit Labor Day march was in striking contrast to the mood of militancy in the working class. Autoworkers have voted by 97 percent to authorize strike action against the Detroit car companies in a mass show of determination to fight. This year has already seen a significant increase in the number of strikes by workers determined to win pay increases to offset the erosion of wages by record inflation and win back past concessions extracted by management with the active assistance of the trade union bureaucracy. Strikes over the past 12 months have included 50,000 academic workers at the University of California, 65,000 teachers and support staff in Los Angeles and an ongoing strike by actors and screenwriters.

Several decades ago, the Detroit Labor Day parade attracted tens of thousands. The small turnout Monday reflected both the collapse of union membership and the erosion of the authority of the trade unions over the working class. Over the past 40 years and more, the UAW has presided over the destruction of more than 1 million jobs in the auto and auto parts industry, with devastating social consequences for cities such as Detroit, Flint, Dayton, Ohio, and scores of smaller communities.

Symbolizing the integration of the unions into the structure of corporate management, the Detroit Metro AFL-CIO decided to hold the rally in front of the old Michigan Central train station, now owned by Ford Motor, which has restored the once derelict building as part of its new mobility technology campus in Detroit. The project was partly funded through massive tax breaks handed out by the city of Detroit and the state of Michigan.

Despite a heavy presence of union officials and Democratic Party operatives at the Labor Day parade, the mood of militancy in the working class found some reflection among rank-and file workers who attended.

A WSWS campaign team spoke to workers at the Detroit Labor Day rally, distributing copies of the *Autoworker Newsletter* containing the Perspective "Labor Day 2023 and the eruption of class struggle." Many workers took the leaflet and stopped to speak to team members.

A young couple who work at the Flint GM Assembly Plant said they were determined to end the two-tier system and the exploitation of temporary workers. Asked how they thought rank-and-file workers

could assert their control over the struggle, one of the workers said, "We voted for Will Lehman who ran for UAW president. But the UAW did not inform workers about the vote and Will was not in the second round." He said that he supported Lehman's call for the building of rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor.

A young worker who just started at Detroit Diesel west of Detroit said, "They split us between the engine plant and the axle plant; there are two separate contracts. Diesel has a higher wage."

He said he agreed that the UAW bureaucracy should be abolished. "The bureaucracy is unnecessary. The UAW was built by workers. It is too much of a business now. We do the jobs, we know what is going on, we should make the decisions."

He explained some of the issues he considered important: "A lot of workplaces have issues with temp workers. We are fighting for pay, job security and benefits. If the auto companies are making lots of money, where is it going? Not to pay the workers more."

"We should be seeing improvements, they should be opening new plants. I look at our plant and see workers who have been here 50 years. That is wrong."

A worker at Sodcia in the Detroit suburb of Centerline said, "They are bringing in workers at \$15 an hour and it takes three years to reach \$18. When I first started there was not work your way up. The pay was equal.

"Now some have to have two jobs in order to live. A family of four right now is paying \$100 a week for healthcare. Some are paying 22-24 percent of their wages for coverage."

A UAW member at Bridgewater Interiors said, "We're working 12-13 hours a day, making 400 seats a day for the Ford Mustang line. They start out at \$17.50 an hour." Speaking about the threatened jobs bloodbath from the transition to EVs, he said, "It's very scary." Asked what he thought about a united fight by auto and auto parts workers, he said, "That would be great for us to all be united together. There's power in numbers."

In Los Angeles, contingents of actors and screenwriters participated in a Labor Day march. Some 76,000 members of SAG-AFTRA and the Writers Guild have been on strike in a rebellion against deteriorating conditions. Twenty-three healthcare workers were arrested in a Labor Day action near the Kaiser Permanente Los Angeles Medical Center called by the SEIU-United Healthcare Workers West ahead of a September 30 contract expiration for 85,000 workers.

A member of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific told the WSWS, "Most of these guys that run the unions are sort of like fat cats now. They've completely forgotten what the union's about. They've got good jobs. It's a very good idea about organizing the rank and file to fight."

The Detroit Metro AFL-CIO, which sponsored the Detroit march, did not invite a single rank-and-file worker to speak at the rally. Those workers choosing to remain to listen to the speakers were subjected to a chorus line of Michigan Democratic politicians. Those addressing the crowd included, Michigan Senator Debbie Stabenow, Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, CIA Democrat Congresswoman Elisa Slotkin, Democratic Congresswoman Haley Stevens, Democratic Socialist Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, Detroit Congressman Shri Thanedar and Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel.

Speakers lauded the repeal of the right-to-work statute in Michigan enacted by the previous Republican administration. The Democratic-

controlled legislature, however, retained the ban on strikes by public school teachers, something that was used by the Detroit Federation of Teachers to prevent a strike by 4,200 educators when school started late last month.

While Republicans use right-to-work laws and similar measures to weaken the unions and undermine the funding for the Democratic Party, the Democrats utilize the labor bureaucracy to hold back the resistance of the working class to austerity and social inequality. The main impact of repealing the right-to-work law will be to force workers under collective bargaining contracts to pay dues to the union apparatus, no matter how many times they sell them out.

One speaker who took note of this was multimillionaire Congresswoman Dingell, a former GM executive, who now postures as a champion of autoworkers. Referencing autoworkers, disgusted by the unending betrayals of the UAW, who opted out of paying union dues, she declared, "If you are an autoworker and you are not paying your union dues ... screw you!" This from a Democrat who, like most on the platform, supported Biden's outlawing of the rail strike.

One after another Democrat absurdly praised the unions, which have presided over the decimation of workers' living standards, for supposedly creating "middle class" jobs in Michigan. Congresswoman Stevens, who supported the halving of wages for auto industry new hires as a member of the White House Auto Task Force—and who also voted to ban the railroad strike—perhaps took the prize for demagogery. She remarked, "They are tapping me on the shoulder asking, 'How are you building the world class cars, how are you paying people the good wages with great jobs?'" adding, "That's because we have a 21st century labor movement."

Fain, who spoke near the end, proposed no concrete strategy to win the demands that have been advanced by the UAW, which conspicuously leave out the massive threat to jobs posed by the transition to electric vehicles. In a sharp warning of the betrayal that is coming, Fain praised the rotten contract shoved down the throats of graduate student workers, including 50,000 at the University of California. He also praised "big wins" at parts suppliers. This would include Clarios battery workers in Holland, Ohio, who twice voted down a sellout agreement proposed by the UAW until they were starved into submission by the union bureaucracy, which isolated and sabotaged their strike.



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