

UAW president backtracks on autoworker demands one week before Big Three contract expirations

Kevin Reed
6 September 2023

Join an online meeting Sunday at 3 p.m. Eastern to discuss the rank-and-file strategy for workers to win their demands. Register here to attend.

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

In an interview with Associated Press published on Wednesday, United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain all but admitted the UAW is preparing a sellout agreement with the Big Three auto manufacturers on contracts that expire at 11:59 p.m. on September 14.

The AP report states, “Fain left open the possibility of avoiding a strike. He acknowledged, more explicitly than he has before, that the union will have to give up some of its demands to reach agreements.”

The AP report then quotes Fain as stating, “There’s a lot of back and forth in bargaining, and naturally, when you go into bargaining, you don’t always get everything you demand. Our workers have high expectations. We made a lot of sacrifices going back to the economic recession.”

One week before the contracts expire, Fain and the UAW apparatus are increasingly downplaying the possibility of a strike and seeking to lower workers’ expectations as they prepare to try to force through massive job cuts and concessions. Throughout the contract “negotiations,” Fain’s administration has worked hand-in-hand with the Big Three and the parts suppliers to conceal from autoworkers the coming massive destruction of jobs in the transition to electric vehicle production and the consequent intensification of the exploitation of the workforce.

Fain’s comments to AP come just two days after US President Joe Biden told the press that “I don’t think a strike is going to happen,” a clear indication that the White House has been assured by Fain—despite public statements to the contrary—that he is working to block any mass action by auto workers against the auto corporations.

When asked Monday by reporters about Biden’s comment, Fain claimed he was “shocked,” despite UAW

officials engaging in continuous discussions with the Biden administration about the contract talks. Less than 48 hours later, Fain’s talking points have increasingly fallen into line with Biden’s.

The latest warning of a sellout from the UAW bureaucracy lends renewed urgency to the need for workers to take control of the struggle, through the expansion of the network of autoworkers rank-and-file committees, in order to discuss and coordinate plans across the plants to overcome a betrayal.

Fain’s statements to AP quickly provoked anger among autoworkers, who voted by 97 percent for strike action against the auto companies.

A worker from GM Flint said, “Yeah, I heard that Fain is now saying that he may be trying to avoid a strike and that we should basically lower our expectations. What the hell? It sounds like he’s saying the same thing as all the union officials have done for years. I admit I was holding out a hope that Fain would be different, but I don’t think so now.”

The corporate media zeroed in on Fain’s comments Wednesday as an indication that contracts at one or more of the automakers may be announced in the days before the deadline, with the Associated Press referring to “signs of movement” in the contract talks.

The UAW has submitted an “economic counter-proposal” to Ford Motor Company, according to Reuters. Contrary to Fain’s claims of “transparency,” the UAW has said nothing to workers about the contents of their offer to the company, and a video “update” from Fain has yet to be scheduled this week. GM is reportedly planning to submit new contract demands Thursday, and Stellantis by the end of the week, Reuters stated.

The UAW’s concealment of information on its exchanges with management has also prompted growing disquiet among workers, with comments by workers on the UAW’s Facebook page pressing for more information to be released.

“People are so fired up about this now”

A Toledo Jeep worker connected Fain’s statements with the recent comments of President Biden about the looming battle of autoworkers, “There’s a lot of back and forth in theater, too, which much of Fain’s posturing is beginning to look like. Between Biden’s statement that there will be no strike and Fain’s backtracking on contractual demands, it looks like another sellout is being planned.”

The Toledo Jeep worker continued, “The UAW membership has the power to vote down any inadequate proposals, and should stand together to show the Big Three we will not accept their scraps. Fain has promised UAW workers the world, but now seems willing to settle for much, much less. People are so fired up about this now.

“First he’s throwing contract proposals in the garbage can and then he’s saying we have to make some concessions because this is a game of give and take. This is pissing off a lot of people.”

Referring to the movement of rank-and-file autoworkers to take the struggle against the auto companies out the hands of the UAW bureaucracy, the Toledo Jeep worker said, “This is exactly what the rank-and file committees have been warning about. I’ve been telling people about Biden and how he and Congress stripped the railroad workers of their power to strike. Fain’s backtracking shows exactly why we need rank-and-file committees.”

A worker at the Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn Michigan told the WSWS that there is widespread anger and disquiet about the developments in the contract fight. “That is just plain wrong,” he said when he heard about UAW head Shawn Fain’s private meeting with President Biden in July. “What has Biden got to do with our contract? The government should stay out of it,” he said.

“They should be asking us, ‘what do we need? What do we want?’ Instead, they are telling us what we are going to get.” The Ford worker explained that a group of co-workers had been sharing the YouTube video of the debate between Will Lehman, Shawn Fain, Ray Curry, and the other candidates during the first round of the UAW presidential elections.

Referring to supporters of the rank-and-file committee network, he said, “I already knew who Will Lehman was from the debate. We voted for him.” Lehman received 111 votes from UAW Local 600 and nearly 5,000 nationwide as a measure of the widespread support for a struggle against the UAW apparatus.

“Fain was there at the International when all the corruption was taking place. If he wasn’t taking money himself, he was turning a blind eye to it. The UAW has not changed. We need these rank-and-file committees. The union is not listening.”

Other workers took to social media to voice their opposition. On the UAW Facebook page, one worker wrote, “You see what the AP is saying? They’re saying that Fain is saying that WE have to give up our demands to reach an agreement... WE ain’t giving up anything. If anyone gives up anything, it will be him conceding against the will of the members. It’s their time to give to us!! Make that clear!! #solidarity”

In recent weeks, the Fain and the UAW apparatus had publicized popular “members’ demands” not because they were actually pursuing them, but rather to head off a rebellion and contain the growing movement of rank-and-file workers for the restoration of higher wages, COLA, pensions, and improved working conditions and benefits—things the UAW bureaucracy had handed over to the auto companies over the past four decades.

Autoworkers should not accept any agreement, either before or after a strike begins, that does not address their basic demands for wage increases that keep pace with inflation, the end of all tiers, the restoration of COLA, the restoration of the eight-hour day and full funding of pensions for active workers and retirees, and not a single plant closing or layoff.

To carry out a serious fight for these demands, the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Steering Committee is calling for the immediate raising of strike pay to \$750 a week, detailed reports and rank-and-file oversight of all contract discussions, the release of all planned factory closures, and the preparation and launching of an all-out strike by auto and auto parts workers on September 15.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact