

# UAW orders vast majority of autoworkers to stay on the job after Big Three contracts expire

Eric London  
14 September 2023

*Join the next online meeting of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network to discuss a strategy to fight the UAW bureaucracy's betrayal. Register here to attend.*

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

*Follow live updates on the Big Three autoworkers struggle.*

At midnight, the contracts for nearly 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the US expired, leaving rank-and-file workers eager to walk out on a strike they authorized by a vote of 97 percent. Despite this, the United Auto Workers bureaucracy ordered the vast majority of the rank and file to stay on the job producing vehicles for the companies. This is after the Big Three automakers have made it clear that they are waging war against autoworkers by rejecting their demands for wage increases to battle inflation, the abolition of tiers, and an end to plant closures and layoffs.

In remarks delivered hours before the expiration, UAW President Shawn Fain announced that even if a deal is not reached by midnight, only three plants will be on strike and that all other workers should remain at work.

While the bureaucracy tells GM Wentzville Assembly in Missouri, Stellantis Toledo Assembly in Ohio, and the final assembly and paint unit of Ford's Michigan Assembly to strike, it ordered the remaining 95 percent of the active membership to "continue working under an expired agreement."

No matter how Fain tries to spin it, the decision to keep workers making products for the companies is a massive betrayal of the will of the rank and file. It is designed to isolate and wear down workers as the UAW bureaucracy, in close coordination with the Biden administration, prepares to attempt to force through a sellout.

Fain's plan divides workers against each other by leaving strikers hanging out to dry with almost no income while transforming those who remain at work essentially into scabs. At the same time, the UAW did not call its partial strike at critical engine and transmission plants, which analysts predicted would have quickly shut down most of the North American auto industry.

If workers are idled at some future date because the UAW strikes an engine or transmission plant, they will go without strike pay or in many cases unemployment benefits, exerting immense pressure on them to cave in to management's demands. This is the aim of Fain's "strategy" to defeat the rank and file and impose the companies' terms.

The UAW has instructed workers not to take any solidarity action at non-striking plants. It has distributed flyers telling these workers they cannot resist speedup and forced overtime because under expired contracts they would have no protection from being fired if management accused them of engaging in a "partial strike." "You cannot do your regular work very slowly or do only part of your job duties and refuse to do others," a UAW flyer read. "An example of a partial strike is refusing to do mandatory overtime."

In a statement issued Thursday, Will Lehman, a rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president in 2022, called for rank-and-file workers to communicate with their coworkers to build alternate structures capable of countermanding Fain's orders. Lehman called workers to take action to take power out of the hands of the traitors in the bureaucracy and put it into the hands of the workers on the shop floor:

The UAW bureaucracy has made clear what side it is on. This means we, the rank and file, must organize ourselves. Hold emergency meetings in your factories and warehouses tonight and tomorrow to democratically discuss and plan how to countermand this betrayal and what collective action is needed. Don't listen to the bureaucrats, listen to your coworkers. Elect leaders from the shop floor and get your entire shift on the same page. Talk on the line, on breaks, at lunch and in the parking lots about what we, the rank and file, want to do. If there is no contract at midnight on Thursday night, we cannot be separated, as Fain wants, we must all stand together—on strike!

Rank-and-file workers across the country responded with outrage to Fain's decision to keep workers on the job past the expiration of the contract. The move came the same day that Stellantis announced another \$500 million dividend payment to the company's wealthy shareholders.

A GM Wentzville worker told the WSWS that many workers at the plant were furious with Fain and wanted to remove him from office. Fain was elected in a fraudulent election with the votes of just 3 percent of the rank and file. Will Lehman is currently suing the Biden administration demanding the election be rerun with actual notice to every worker that an election is taking place.

"Folks are mad and worried this guy is going to make us lose what we already have, which is the bare minimum," she said. Workers at Wentzville are "asking how to get rid of him. Most say he is selling us out. [People] will be on the streets with no strike pay and no layoff benefits while he will still gets his paycheck." (Fain makes roughly \$300,000 per year in workers' dues money.)

A worker at Local 598 at the GM truck assembly plant in Flint, Michigan referenced the rank and file's 97 percent strike authorization and posted on their local's website, "Why take a vote to strike if they already planned on this? And if we come to work without a contract, why are we paying union dues to not have our wants represented? Working without a contract seems insane to me!"

At meetings held Wednesday by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committees Network, workers confirmed that the mood in their plants was for a walkout across all three companies. The meetings, which were attended by workers in the US, Mexico and Canada, were a powerful expression of a growing desire for a real fight against the companies.

A Lansing, Michigan GM worker said, "We feel like Shawn Fain got us all pumped up and ready to go and make a difference, but now it seems to me and to the people I talk with that he is reeling it back and backing it down. After Fain's live feed, we are pretty upset. This is our time. This is where everybody feels strike while the iron is hot, no pun intended. All of a sudden Fain is saying we are on wait and hold mode? It's a bunch of talk for nothing. In my area we are ready to go to bat, we are ready to walk out, we are ready to go."

A worker from Warren Truck in suburban Detroit added:

"We are ready to strike. We're anticipating it. We're showing our unity. It's just going to be devastating if we don't get what we're asking for in this contract because a lot of our lives are literally depending on it.

"I know the UAW is not for us. They have made that evident. It's very frustrating knowing that we're paying union dues. It's just a form of the company taking more money from us, money that we don't have. I really am hoping that people are going to realize what is going on, and I hope that we're going to initiate our own strike because at this point in time I think that's the only way we're going to get anything close to what

we're asking for. We have to spread knowledge to one another and stand strong."

There is growing concern in the corporate-political establishment that the UAW bureaucracy will not be able to hold workers back from waging a united struggle across plants, even beyond the Big Three. Workers at the parts supplier Dana Inc. tell the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company texted employees Wednesday urging workers to show up to work, even though Dana workers operate under a separate contract than the Big Three.

"As the UAW continues negotiations, regardless of the outcome at the expiration of the contract we are still scheduled to work tomorrow night's shift," the message reads.

The struggle of US autoworkers is part of a growing movement across the US and across the world. Workers in Canada, where a contract for 18,000 autoworkers expires September 18, report hearing nothing from the trade union bureaucracy, Unifor. The contract for 30,000 autoworkers in South Korea recently expired, where workers also confront the threat of massive job cuts due to the transition to EV. This month, the contract for 150,000 autoworkers and metalworkers in Turkey expires.

There are currently 1,400 UAW members on strike against Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and hundreds more on strike against Dometic in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. In the US alone, the contracts for tens of thousands of UAW members expire in the coming weeks. The time is right for a unified struggle. This includes:

- Yangfeng auto parts, contract expiring September 15
- Kendricks Plastics in Grand Rapids, Michigan expiring September 15
- Las Vegas Casino workers expiring September 3
- Flex-N-Gate parts contract in Grand Prairie, Texas expiring October 1
- Mack Trucks contract expiring October 1
- Ohio Mayco parts plants contract expiring October 1
- General Dynamics contract expiring October 22
- Allison transmission in Indianapolis, Indiana contract expiring November 14

To harness workers' strength, it is necessary to countermand Fain's order that 95 percent of the membership to keep working while only two full facilities strike. Rank-and-file workers must speak to each other at work and on social media and form ad hoc committees with their coworkers to plan common action.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**