

The battle against the automakers is more than a strike, it's class warfare

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This statement by Will Lehman was originally published in Newsweek.

Lehman works at Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania. He ran for UAW president in 2022, winning almost 5,000 votes. He is currently suing the US Department of Labor for a rerun of the election over voter suppression.

On Friday, President Biden spoke from the White House about the autoworkers' strike, calling for the car corporations and the United Auto Workers to reach a "win-win" agreement for workers.

"Record profits have not been shared fairly, in my view, with those workers," Biden said. "Workers deserve a fair share of the benefits they helped create for an enterprise."

Biden's remarks raise fundamental questions about the distribution of wealth in the United States. Much more than a contract dispute is involved.

Workers' wages at Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis have declined dramatically over the past 50 years. In 1973, autoworkers received an average hourly wage of \$5.54 an hour—more than \$38 an hour in today's dollars. If that wage had merely kept up with inflation (setting aside the massive increases in productivity over that time), autoworkers would be making nearly \$40 an hour today.

But today temporary workers at GM start at \$16.67 and top out at \$20, half as much as workers five decades ago. Should temps be lucky enough to be given full-time status, their top pay is capped at just over \$32 an hour, which it takes eight long years to reach.

Another comparison: GM CEO Mary Barra received a \$28.9 million compensation package in 2022. She made approximately \$2.4 million a month, \$550,000 a week, \$110,000 a day, or an "hourly" rate of nearly \$13,800. It would take a temporary worker making the maximum \$20 an hour almost three years to make as much as Barra does in a single day.

The difference between the two, however, is that every penny of Barra's pay package is ultimately derived from the value produced by the labor of the working class.

How can Biden's "fair share" be distributed between a corporate executive making \$13,894 an hour and a temp making \$20 an hour?

The conventional argument made by champions of the "free market" system is that executives are paid for their "performance," by which is meant their ability to deliver for Wall Street. They make millions because the shareholders receive billions.

And how much profit have the companies made? In 2022, GM, Ford, and Stellantis made a combined \$77 billion in gross profit.

If that \$77 billion were to be distributed among all 150,000 Big Three autoworkers in the US, each worker would receive a bonus of roughly \$513,333.

Of course, GM, Stellantis, and Ford employ many tens of thousands more workers around the world, and their labor is also exploited to produce the billions which accrue to the shareholders. There are also the vast supply chains, workers throughout the auto parts plants, who are integral to the productive process.

The president claims that a "win-win" contract for workers and the corporate owners can be reached. But Biden, the veteran capitalist politician, knows that's impossible. What the president is trying to cover up is that workers and the corporate oligarchy have fundamentally irreconcilable class interests. There is no "fair share" in a set-up in which investors get billions, executives get millions, and workers get pennies.

There is an approaching day of reckoning with social realities that have long been concealed and covered up. Workers are increasingly aware of the vastly unequal society in which they live and are looking for a way to change it. That's why when I ran as a socialist in the UAW's 2022 elections, I received 5,000 votes from

autoworkers, despite efforts by the union apparatus to suppress the vote, resulting in a turnout of just 9 percent.

UAW President Shawn Fain has taken to denouncing “corporate greed” and the “billionaire class.” In reality, Fain and the union bureaucracy he oversees serve an essential function on behalf of the corporations. They block or limit strikes (as they are currently doing, isolating a walkout at the Big Three to just three plants) and enforce the demands of management, imposing one sellout, concessionary contract after the other for the past 45 years. For these services, the bureaucrats receive their own payouts, including six-figure salaries that put them in the top 5 percent of income earners, an affluent upper-middle class.

The White House and the UAW leadership have been in constant communication for months, closely coordinating their strategy and talking points, with both Biden and Fain repeating the same stock phrases about a “fair share” ad nauseam.

Trump, the fascist demagogue, is seeking to capture growing discontent among workers, particularly over the looming jobs bloodbath related to electric vehicles. To stop workers from directing their anger at the corporations, he scapegoats workers in Mexico and China for layoffs and plant closures.

What Biden, Trump, and Fain all fear is that inequality is driving the working class in the United States towards socialist politics—that is, a political perspective based upon workers’ independent class interests.

Capitalism is showing masses of workers that it is at war with their basic needs. Inflation, the unrestrained transmission of COVID-19, deadly working conditions, the climate crisis, and the threat of nuclear world war are confronting workers all over the world. More and more workers are seeing the need to overturn this entire system and bring about one in which social need, not private profit, determine how society’s resources are organized.



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