

Auto strikes spread as Biden and UAW struggle to contain rank-and-file movement

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On Wednesday, the rank-and-file strike movement against the auto corporations spread from the Big Three to the suppliers and from the industrial Midwest to the deep south, when 200 ZF chassis workers walked off at the plant in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The workers are UAW members and the strike began after they rejected a third sellout contract put forward by the Mercedes-Benz supplier and the UAW bureaucracy. A shutdown at ZF's Tuscaloosa facility will likely stop production at Mercedes-Benz's massive non-union assembly plant nearby.

For over a century, the corporations have used the South to undermine and weaken workers in the industrial centers of Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis and elsewhere, but the strike at ZF shows this is now breaking down. The British *Financial Times* explained that the strike means "Mercedes-Benz has been dragged into the wave of industrial action sweeping across the US auto industry," and that the "Alabama workers say they need higher wages and better health care benefits similar to the employees of the Big Three."

The ZF strike comes as 1,400 UAW members are on strike against Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and as 200 auto parts workers continue their strike against Dometic in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Workers everywhere are fighting for the same demands: massive pay increases, an end to tiers and layoffs, the hiring of temporary workers, fully funded pensions and adequate healthcare.

This growing rebellion has provoked serious concerns in the White House and on Wall Street because it has the potential to break out of the control of the UAW bureaucracy, which has kept all but 12,000 of the UAW's 146,000 Big Three membership at work after last week's contract expiration. Contracts for tens of thousands of UAW members in the auto parts and other industries expire in the coming weeks all over the country.

On Wednesday, the Biden administration announced it would not send Labor Secretary Julie Su or Biden advisor Gene Sperling to Detroit, for fear it would tip off workers about an impending sellout and provoke wider resistance. According to the *Washington Post*, Biden's announcement last Friday that he was sending his two envoys to Detroit provoked concerns among "UAW officials" who "feared the presence of Su and Sperling would be interpreted by some workers as a sign that the administration was swooping in to control the negotiations."

The *Post* cited Kate Bronfenbrenner, Director of Cornell University's Industrial and Labor Relations department, as saying, "Interference from the White House, while well-intentioned, can be seen by some workers as a sign of weakness from their campaign or a sign that concessions are going to happen."

Workers know Biden intervened to stop the strike by 110,000 railroad workers last year. The president and the Democrats and Republicans in Congress came together to legalize the strike and force workers to accept a pro-company deal, brokered by the White House, which rail workers had already rejected.

White House officials have been in regular contact with the UAW bureaucracy for months. If Biden feels the need to postpone a more public intervention now it is because the administration believes Fain has not worn down the resistance of rank-and-file workers enough to get them to swallow a sellout deal. A further intervention by the White House carries the risk of provoking wider walkouts and the repudiation of any deal backed by the president. That is why, at least for the time being, Biden is relying on the UAW bureaucracy to beat back the militancy of workers.

The entire purpose of the UAW's "stand up strike" is to keep workers in the dark, wear them down, force layoffs across the Big Three and parts industry, while keeping profits flowing to corporate coffers and facilitating the companies' efforts to stockpile parts. It is not a "strike," it is a tactic to defeat the rank-and-file.

The growing movement of the working class has led to

angry comments from both the Republican and Democratic Parties. Republican Senator Tim Scott said that Ronald Reagan “gave us a great example” by firing striking air-traffic control workers during the PATCO strike of 1981. Leading Democratic Party figures are also demanding concessions, with former Obama “auto czar” and investment banker Steven Rattner calling in the *New York Times* for workers to accept further concessions for the good of the “economy,” by which he meant for the good of wealthy shareholders like himself.

The *Times* and leading Democrats are worried that the movement among autoworkers is not only directed against the Big Three, but is acquiring an increasingly political character, with anger growing against the two parties of Wall Street.

On Tuesday the *Times* featured an article titled, “Striking autoworkers are cool to Biden’s embrace.” The article notes that Biden and the Democrats have “yet to convince many rank-and-file UAW members that his sentiments are more than just nice-sounding words. That was the prevailing view in interviews with two dozen striking workers for Ford and Jeep in Michigan and Ohio this weekend.”

A primary concern of the *Times* and Biden administration is that rank-and-file opposition threatens the ongoing US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, as well as plans for war against China. These wars require billions of dollars and the disciplining of the workforce for war production in the US.

The UAW bureaucracy under Shawn Fain is doing everything it can to promote the capitalist Democratic Party, inviting leading Democrats to speak at rallies and falsely presenting them as workers’ “friends.” The *Washington Post* acknowledged Wednesday that this has not been popular: “The UAW’s account on X, the social media site formerly known as Twitter, for instance, has retweeted scores of Democratic lawmakers who have backed the union’s demands,” it reports, adding that rank-and-file anger means Fain faces “limits on how much he can back the White House, according to labor experts.”

The fascist Donald Trump is attempting to capitalize on growing opposition to the Democrats, announcing that he will speak to a group of workers next Wednesday instead of attending the Republican debate scheduled that evening. The details of Trump’s visit are not known, but Trump’s event will be a heavily stage-managed attempt to oppose Biden’s plan to transition to EV and call for the elimination of further regulations on corporate profit and exploitation. Trump tells workers to direct their anger not against the corporations, but against workers’ allies in countries like Mexico and Canada. When asked on NBC last weekend if he supported autoworkers’ demands against the corporations,

Trump refused to answer.

As both the Democrats and Republicans scramble to suppress the emerging movement of the rank-and-file, Wall Street and the corporations all agree that the present “stand up” strike is having no economic impact, since it has not stopped production.

Stephen Brown, senior director at Fitch Ratings, said in a written statement, “We expect the initial financial impact of this first round of strikes to be limited, since the UAW is only striking one plant each at Ford, GM and Stellantis.”

This would change if the strike spread. Dean Baker, an economist close to the Biden administration, told the *Post*, “It’s not like it’s done great damage to the economy, but if it goes on for weeks and expands, it really could.”

It is urgent that rank-and-file workers fight to expand the strike across the Big Three and unite with workers in Canada, where the Unifor union called off a strike at the last minute Tuesday night and ordered workers to keep working. The union claimed it had reached a tentative agreement with Ford, which employs 5,600 workers in Ontario, without providing workers any information.

The strike in Alabama and concerned comments in the media show that there is a powerful mood to fight, but everything is being done by the corporations, the political parties and the UAW and Unifor bureaucracies to hold the rank and file back.

From the standpoint of the rank and file, there is no legitimate argument against launching an all-out strike. Workers can fight for this by speaking to their coworkers at work and on social media. By communicating, holding discussions and forming networks within each plant, workers can build support for launching an all-out strike as quickly as possible.



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