

Bill Ford threatens autoworkers with layoffs and plant closures if strike expands

Kevin Reed
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On Monday morning, Ford Motor Company executive chair Bill Ford gave a right-wing nationalist speech at the company's Rouge manufacturing complex in Dearborn, Michigan, in which he threatened autoworkers with mass layoffs and factory closures if they do not accept the contract terms demanded by the company.

The great-grandson of company founder Henry Ford, William Clay Ford Jr. earned \$17.3 million in 2022 and has an estimated net worth of over \$2 billion.

Bill Ford took the unusual step of commenting publicly on the contract negotiations amid growing demands by autoworkers for an all-out strike against Ford and other auto companies. He is well aware, and clearly concerned, of the rank-and-file opposition to UAW President Shawn Fain's bogus stand-up strike, which has kept more than three-quarters of the 146,000 UAW members at Ford, GM and Stellantis on the job and producing profits a month after the expiration of their contracts.

Ford's remarks followed the statements last week by Ford Blue President Kumar Galhotra, who said, "We have reached our limit" and the company would not be offering anything more in the contract negotiations.

Speaking before a small audience of news media and company executives, Ford basically instructed Fain and the UAW bureaucracy to "bring an end to this acrimonious round of talks." There is no question that, behind the backs of autoworkers, the UAW bureaucracy and Ford have already agreed to the parameters of such a deal. As of now, however, Fain is still trying to wear down the resistance of workers to such a sellout deal, and last week was forced to call out an additional 8,700 workers at Ford Kentucky Truck

plant to try to maintain his credibility.

Growing impatient with the delays, the Ford chair decided to make his threats directly to rank-and-file workers. "As the UAW strike against Ford continues, we are at a crossroads," he warned. "Choosing the right path isn't just about Ford's future and our ability to compete. This is about the future of the American automobile industry."

Although he did not spell it out, "choosing the right path" and supporting the US auto industry's "ability to compete" requires that autoworkers drop their demands to restore years of concessions the UAW has handed to Ford and other automakers. This includes demands for wage increases that keep pace with inflation, the restoration of COLA and pensions and an end to the hated tiered wages system to the profits of the Big Three automakers.

If workers did not surrender, Ford warned, the company would close plants like the Rouge Complex and carry out massive layoffs. "Ford's ability to invest in the future is the absolute lifeblood of this company. If we lose it," he said, "many jobs will be lost, so will future investments, so will factories like the one we are in today, and communities will suffer greatly."

In fact, Ford has already launched a campaign of economic blackmail against workers. The company is laying off 700 workers who build the F-150 Lightning, the electric version of its top-selling truck at the Rouge Electric Vehicle Center. The company claims the elimination of one of its three shifts is temporary and due to slow sales.

In addition, Ford laid off 550 employees Monday at Dearborn Stamping, Dearborn Diversified Manufacturing, Rawsonville Components Plant and Sterling Axle Plant, blaming the layoffs on UAW strikes in Louisville and Chicago. This brings Ford's total to approximately 2,480 strike-related layoffs.

Bill Ford couched his emphasis on US competitiveness in strident economic nationalist terms aimed at pitting American autoworkers against their brothers and sisters in countries around the world. He said, "This should not be Ford versus the UAW; it should be Ford and the UAW

versus Toyota, Honda, Tesla and all the Chinese companies that want to enter our home market.” The competitors of the US auto companies “are loving this strike because they know the longer it goes, the better it is for them. They will win and all of us will lose.”

Ford also presented his economic nationalism in terms of support for US imperialist militarism around the world today, “A strong manufacturing base is critical to our national security. Building things in America matters now more than ever, especially in these uncertain times and we can’t take that for granted.” He also referenced the support by Ford Motor Company at the Rouge complex for US intervention “in two world wars” by converting the operations over for “building boats, tank parts and jet engines.”

Fain has recently made similar statements about the role then-UAW Vice President Walter Reuther played in helping convert the auto industry for wartime production during World War II, which included enforcing a no-strike pledge. This is particularly ominous given the Biden administration’s moves to recruit the labor bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle as it escalates its military aggression against Russia and China and sends naval ships to back Israel’s criminal bombardment of the Palestinians.

Bill Ford praised former UAW presidents Douglas Fraser (1977–1983), Ron Gettelfinger (2002–2010) and Bob King (2010–2014), who spearheaded the attacks on auto jobs, wages and working conditions in the auto factories on behalf of the employers for decades. He boasted that he has “been the most pro-union leader in our industry,” and “Ford is the strongest partner the UAW has ever known.” The billionaire also referred several times to his “UAW colleagues,” “some of whom I’ve known for decades, many are close personal friends.”

As an example of this collusion, Ford cited the deaths of six Ford workers in the February 1, 1999, explosion at the Rouge power plant, declaring that “we all came together as a family.” The UAW bureaucracy and management certainly came together, with then-UAW Vice President Ronald Gettelfinger rushing to the company’s defense, saying the powerhouse was a “safe facility.”

In fact, the UAW Local 600 bureaucracy repeatedly ignored the grievances filed by power plant workers, including the workers killed in the blast, who warned about the imminent dangers of an explosion due to years of cost-cutting and lack of maintenance.

Far from saving jobs, the decades of labor-management collusion pursued by the UAW bureaucracy have led to the number of UAW members at Ford falling from 176,000 in 1976, the year of the last national strike against Ford, to only 57,000 today.

While the Ford executive chair threatened autoworkers with job elimination, he said nothing about the plans of his company to slash jobs in the transition to battery-powered electric vehicles from internal combustion engine cars. In this, Bill Ford was participating—along with the rest of the auto industry corporate representatives and the UAW leadership—in a conspiracy against rank-and-file workers.

Responding to the speech by Bill Ford, UAW President Fain said nothing about the corporate threat to eliminate jobs and close factories. Instead, Fain continued to posture, saying, “Bill Ford knows exactly how to settle this strike. ... It’s not the UAW and Ford against foreign automakers. It’s autoworkers everywhere against corporate greed. If Ford wants to be the all-American auto company, they can pay all-American wages and benefits.”

If the UAW bureaucracy has any dispute with Ford it is not over the continued destruction of the jobs, wages and conditions of its members. Fain wants Ford to put the new EV battery plants under the union contract so the UAW can collect dues from the low-paid workers in these plants. Up to this point, Ford appears reluctant to do so.

Hearing Bill Ford’s threat to close plants and destroy jobs, a member of the recently formed Ford Rouge Workers Rank-and-File Committee pointed to the company’s sudden announcement of temporary layoffs of entire shifts at the Rouge Electric Vehicle Center. “This is like ‘the Empire strikes back.’ It’s in retaliation for the strike at the Kentucky Truck Plant. They are trying to intimidate us,” he said, and dismissed Ford’s threats with contempt. “It is not going to fly.”

He pointed to the recent history of the company and stressed the determination of workers to win back massive concessions they sacrificed 15 years ago. “Bill Ford came to the UAW in 2008-09 and asked us to sacrifice to save the company from bankruptcy. We gave up wages, pensions, vacation time and other things. That was never supposed to be permanent. But when the company got on its feet, they never reimbursed us. Now they’re making record profits year after year. Stockholders and company executives are pulling in millions of dollars. Now it’s our time; and we want it back—everything we gave up.” To do this, he said, “Every autoworker has to walk out now.”



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