

UAW announces ratification of sellout contracts at the Big Three: The way forward for autoworkers

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20 November 2023

After delaying for days, the United Auto Workers announced Monday that its labor agreements with General Motors, Ford and Stellantis had been ratified by UAW members, claiming a margin of 64 percent in favor across the three companies. “The members have spoken,” UAW President Shawn Fain said. “After years of cutbacks, months of our Stand Up campaign, and weeks on the picket line, we have turned the tide for the American autoworker.”

Fain and his PR spin masters are peddling the fairy tale that rank-and-file workers are thrilled with the agreements and the bogus “stand up” strike policy that produced them. Even by the UAW’s official count, 36,500 workers voted against the deals, which the UAW, Biden and the corporate media claimed were “historic” and “life-changing,” and far more would have voted “no” had they felt they had a prospect of fighting for anything better.

On the GM agreement, 47 percent of production workers voted “no,” and the contract passed by a mere 2,002 votes out of the 30,860 ballots cast. Workers at seven of GM’s 11 assembly plants defeated the deal with “no” votes up to 69 percent, and it barely passed at three others. Ford and Stellantis workers at the Kentucky Truck Plant and Toledo Assembly Complex—two of the largest auto plants in the country—decisively rejected it.

Moreover, given the fact that there was no rank-and-file oversight of the ratification process, nothing the UAW bureaucracy says about the vote can be taken at face value. As late as last Wednesday, the media was predicting the defeat of the GM deal, until a supposedly large “yes” vote at the plant in Arlington, Texas. Rank-and-file workers are currently circulating petitions to overturn the results because UAW officials included the votes of thousands of workers at Ultium and GM Subsystems, who were not even GM employees, among

other irregularities.

From the beginning, Fain did everything he could to divide workers and wear down their resistance. The limited strikes never involved more than one third of the members and did more economic damage to workers than to the companies. The union only called out the most profitable plants right before announcing the deals, and it sent workers back to work before they saw the contracts, let alone voted on them.

As for the “historic” agreements, the pay raises of 25 percent over four-and-a-half years do not make up for the massive decline in real wages autoworkers have suffered due to UAW concessions during the industry restructuring in 2009 and the decades-high inflation of recent years. The core demands of workers—the restoration of company-paid retiree benefits, the ending of tiers and abuse of temps, shorter work weeks and large increases for pensioners—were all dropped by Fain and the UAW apparatus.

Most significantly, the new deals will open the door for a massive attack on jobs as the auto industry converts to electric vehicle production. Auto executives have assured investors that any modest increases in labor costs will be more than made up for by slashing jobs.

Ford CEO Jim Farley, who has said the industry requires 40 percent fewer workers to produce EVs, declared that the company will “attack cost and waste throughout our operations.” With the ratification of the deals, all the automakers are accelerating their “voluntary employment termination” plans to eliminate white-collar and hourly workers.

What conclusions must be drawn?

First, if autoworkers had had their own independent organizations in the factories, this sellout would have been defeated. The consequences of these deals will drive

many autoworkers, including those who voted “yes,” into renewed struggles. The officially reported 45 percent opposition will grow to 90 percent opposition. But these new struggles must be organized through the development of rank-and-file committees to abolish the apparatus and transfer power to the shop floor.

Fain’s declaration of victory will prove pyrrhic. In fact, the ramming through of the contracts has exposed his pretenses of “reforming” the apparatus and ending corruption. The UAW apparatus, now with the addition of Fain’s supporters in the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left organizations, is controlled by an army of highly paid functionaries whose upper-middle class incomes and lifestyles depend on their collaboration in the destruction of the jobs, living standards and factory conditions of the workers they falsely claim to represent.

This has been demonstrated not only at the Big Three, but also at Mack Trucks, where Fain and local UAW bureaucrats told striking workers they would be fired and replaced with strikebreakers if they voted to reject a UAW-backed contract that they had rejected by a three-to-one margin just a month before.

Opposition to the contract at Mack was led by the Mack Trucks Workers Rank-and-File Committee. A leading role was played by Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker who ran as a socialist candidate for UAW president against Fain on a program of abolishing the UAW apparatus. Lehman won nearly 5,000 votes and would have won many times more if the UAW bureaucracy had not deliberately disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of UAW members.

The Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committees Network—which included groups of workers at the Flint and Lansing GM plants, the Stellantis Warren Truck and Toledo Assembly Complex, the Rouge Complex in Dearborn, Michigan and at Mack Trucks—was the only rank-and-file organization that told workers the truth, exposed the lies of Fain and organized opposition to the sellout deal. An important foundation has been laid, but these committees must be built and expanded in every factory.

The Big Three and Mack Trucks struggle also demonstrates that workers are not only fighting the corporations and the UAW bureaucracy, but the entire ruling class and its state. Fain was in constant contact with Biden and White House officials.

Biden’s policy is that of corporatism—that is, the integration of the union apparatus into management and the state, on the basis of a defense of the interests of the

ruling elite. In exchange for the UAW’s collusion in the EV jobs massacre, the Biden administration pressed the automakers to give the union bureaucracy access to the new EV battery plants so a portion of the workers’ meager paychecks could be deducted to pay dues to the UAW.

The transition to EVs is part of the struggle by US imperialism against China for the control of vital resources, supply chains and markets. Both Biden and Fain have repeatedly referred to the UAW’s role in converting factories to wartime production—and, left unsaid, enforcing no strike pledges—during World War II.

Fain is clearly auditioning to play a central role on behalf of US imperialism, confirming what the great revolutionary Leon Trotsky said in 1938: “In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers.” Fain and the UAW feted Biden at an event in Illinois this month to hail the UAW sellout deals, while millions in the US and around the world were denouncing “Genocide Joe” for backing the Israeli massacre of Palestinians in Gaza.

The opposition of autoworkers to the sellout contracts is part of a growing movement of workers throughout the world. In the US, more than half a million workers have been engaged in strikes this year, and working class actors are currently fighting the sellout of their struggle by the SAG-AFTRA union. A global resurgence of the class struggle is taking place, from battles by autoworkers in Europe, Turkey and China against the restructuring of the global auto industry, to the mass struggles by workers and young people against the genocide in Gaza and the efforts by capitalist governments everywhere to make workers bear the cost of imperialist war.

Autoworkers and ever-broadening sections of the working class will continue to be thrust into struggle. The fight against inequality must be fused with the struggle against imperialist war. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International in 2021, is the organizational means by which workers can unite their struggles and coordinate them across national borders.



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