

Behind the UAW unionization campaign: Containing the class struggle on behalf of Biden and auto bosses

Shannon Jones
6 December 2023

In what it calls an “unprecedented” move, the United Auto Workers publicly launched a unionization campaign last week targeting more than a dozen nonunion auto companies in the US, including major Asian and European factories owned by Honda, Toyota, VW and Nissan as well as EV maker Tesla. About 150,000 workers are employed at these companies, approximately the current UAW membership at the Detroit Three automakers—General Motors, Ford and Chrysler owner Stellantis.

The UAW has posted a prominent call for nonunion workers to organize with the UAW on its website along with a video statement by UAW President Shawn Fain pointing to record profits in the North American auto industry and obscene levels of executive pay. Fain said hundreds of nonunion autoworkers, particularly in the US South, had contacted the UAW about organizing in the wake of the UAW contract fight, which he claimed produced “historic” gains for workers.

The UAW said it would initially focus a major effort at the flagship Toyota assembly plant in Georgetown, Kentucky, which employs some 7,800 workers. It has also set its sights on Tesla.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk issued a statement opposing unionization in the wake of the UAW announcement, as did Honda and Nissan. Toyota, Volkswagen and EV company Rivian did not comment.

Conditions at Tesla and other nonunion auto companies the UAW is targeting are certainly atrocious. Tesla CEO Elon Musk notoriously defied public health orders in order to restart production during the pandemic. Speedup, forced overtime and high injury rates are rampant at all the transplants, along with the widespread use of casual and contract labor.

At the same time, the interest in unionization among these workers undoubtedly reflects a broader mood of militancy in the working class. The growing restlessness among workers in the US South, historically the most impoverished and oppressed section of the country, is particularly significant.

The UAW, however, is incapable of addressing workers’ concerns. For decades, the UAW has functioned as an extension of corporate management, ensuring “labor peace” in exchange for the patronage of the auto bosses, including the funneling of tens and hundreds of millions into the coffers of the UAW apparatus through various joint programs and committees. The program of strident America First nationalism and unlimited union management collaboration long ago erased any connection by the UAW to the real strivings and interests of workers.

Indeed, since 2017 more than a dozen top UAW officials have been

sent to prison for taking bribes and kickbacks, including two previous presidents of the union. As a result of the corruption scandal, the UAW was compelled to hold its first-ever direct membership vote for top officers. Facing an insurgent campaign by Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman, however, the entrenched bureaucracy did everything possible to strip workers of the right to vote and install long-time UAW International representative Shawn Fain as president in a vote that involved less than 10 percent of the membership.

The chief motivation behind the UAW’s union drive is to collect more dues money from workers to finance the salaries and posh lifestyles of the army of union bureaucrats in its national, regional and local offices.

Workers certainly need organization to fight. To win real improvements, however, workers need to completely control these organizations so they can wage a collective fight against the corporations without the interference of a bureaucratic union apparatus, which functions on behalf of management.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers themselves, to fight for what the working class needs, not what the corporations, politicians or union bureaucrats say is possible or acceptable. This includes real rank-and-file control over workplace health and safety and the rejection of all forms of union-management collusion.

To fight transnational corporations, moreover, workers need an international strategy and organization. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was founded in 2021 to coordinate the struggles of workers across national borders and oppose the efforts to pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom.

Rank-and-file committees are needed whether or not workers vote to bring the UAW into the plants. The proof of this was amply demonstrated by the experience of GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the recent contract battle.

The 2023 Detroit Three contract struggle

After a series of massive UAW contract rejections at Volvo Trucks, Deere, Dana, Clarios, Lear, Mack Trucks and other plants—which

showed the growing influence of rank-and-file committees—the UAW bureaucracy, working with the Biden administration, decided to use a different tack and rhetoric in the 2023 contract negotiations.

Fain raised a series of popular demands, which were largely plagiarized from the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network, including a 46 percent pay raise, the restoration of cost-of-living adjustments (COLA), the abolition of tiers, an end to the abuse of temps, and a fight against plant closures and layoffs.

However, the UAW never had any intention of fighting for these demands. Ignoring the 97 percent vote by workers for an all-out strike, Fain launched a series of “stand up strikes” which never involved more than a third of UAW members. While doing negligible damage to the corporations, the UAW used the stand up strike to wear down the resistance of workers to a sellout agreement, which had been reached months before. Despite this, 47 percent of GM production workers still voted against the deal.

Far from being a “historic win,” the contract has paved the way for mass job cuts as the companies transition to EVs. The 25 percent wage increase barely covers the 22 percent inflation rise since the 2019 contract. The hated two-tier system has been kept, with the wage progression only shortened from eight to three years. Company-paid pensions and retiree health benefits have not been restored, and the companies will continue to exploit large numbers of temporary workers.

Two weeks after the contracts were ratified, GM executives announced a \$10 billion stock buyback program and a 30 percent increase in dividend payments to shareholders, making a mockery of Fain’s claims that the UAW had “squeezed every penny” out of the corporations.

In a nod to the UAW unionization campaign, GM CEO Mary Barra expressed approval for the pay raises Toyota, Honda and other nonunion automakers gave workers in response to the UAW-Detroit Three contracts, saying this would “close the gap” with the wages GM pays.

In other words, sections of big business see advantages in having the UAW get into the non-union plants. In their eyes, this would help standardize pay, lower turnover rates and put a labor police force in place to suppress strikes and other disruptions to production.

Because of its decades of betrayals—including its complicity in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of UAW members’ jobs—previous efforts by the UAW bureaucracy to organize Japanese and European owned factories in the US have failed in humiliating fashion. This includes the defeat at Nissan in Canton, Mississippi in 2017, where workers voted by 63-37 percent against unionization, and the 2014 failed campaign at the Mercedes Benz plant in Vance, Alabama.

In exchange for management’s support for the UAW’s unionization campaign at the VW plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 2014, the UAW signed a letter where it agreed to “maintaining and where possible enhancing the cost advantages and other competitive advantages [Volkswagen] enjoys relative to its competitors in the United States and North America.” Despite, or more likely because of, management’s backing for the UAW, workers voted against union recognition in 2014, and again in 2019.

The Biden administration

Because of these defeats, the UAW bureaucracy is relying on the Biden administration and the Democratic Party more than ever to back its organizing drive.

Appearing with Fain at a November 9 union rally in Illinois following the announcement of the UAW sellout deal at Stellantis, President Biden said, “I want this type of contract for all autoworkers.” Earlier that day the president told reporters he “absolutely” supports the UAW’s efforts to unionize Toyota, Tesla and other non-union automakers.

The Biden administration has promoted the unions as a key element in his fortress America strategy of securing the home front as it backs Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza and escalates its military confrontation with Russia and China. As he did in the Big Three contract struggle, Biden seeks to use the unions to suppress strikes, prevent disruptions in supply chains and hold wage increases below the cost of inflation to impose the cost of militarism on the shoulders of workers.

The real attitude of the Biden administration to the working class was graphically exposed in its move to block a strike by 100,000 US railroad workers and impose a management-dictated contract.

The attempt by the Biden administration and the bureaucratic trade union apparatus to promote unionization at Amazon failed in spectacular manner, with substantial majorities at a number of facilities, most notably Bessemer, Alabama, voting against union recognition.

The one successful organizing drive at Amazon, that led by the Amazon Labor Union at Amazon’s JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York, gained traction because the ALU raised certain popular demands and distanced itself from the corrupt AFL-CIO apparatus. However, no sooner did the ALU win recognition then it leaped into the embrace of the AFL-CIO and the Biden administration. More than one and a half years after union recognition workers still do not have a contract and conditions are as bad as ever. Meanwhile, ALU founder Chris Smalls and other officials are embroiled in a bitter and ugly squabble over control of the ALU’s now considerable assets.

Heading the current UAW organizing drive is Brian Shepherd, a member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party. A number of DSA operatives such as Shepherd have been assigned to well-paid posts in the UAW apparatus to aid the bureaucracy in attempts to dupe workers into believing the union has been “reformed.”

As Big Three workers have learned, there is a vast chasm between the rhetoric of Fain and his DSA pitchmen and the reality of the day-to-day sellout of workers on the shop floor. The lesson from these experiences is that workers must take the initiative themselves by building their own democratic shop floor organizations, as part of the growing national and international network of rank-and-file committees. These must remain under the control of workers and independent of the UAW apparatus.

Workers interested in more information about building rank-and-file committees should fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact