

CNN Business names UAW President Shawn Fain “labor leader of the year” after sellout at Big Three

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CNN Business has named United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain “labor leader of the year” for 2023. The cable news channel bestowed the honor to the UAW president for “the success of the contracts” covering 145,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers last year, according to a December 27 piece, titled “Shawn Fain, CNN Business’ labor leader of the year, plans to keep automakers sweating.”

The article by CNN Business senior writer Chris Isidore stands reality on its head, presenting the UAW contracts and similar deals at UPS and the film and television industry as historic turning points for workers who have suffered decades of union-backed concessions and falling real wages. It is part of the continuing media effort to to prop up the discredited labor bureaucracy, including articles in the *Wall Street Journal* (“For Labor Unions, 2023 Was the Year of the Strike—and Big Victories”) and the “left” liberal *New Republic* (“Hero of the year: Shawn Fain”).

Isidore writes: “CNN Business has been naming a ‘CEO of the year’ for many years now, but this year’s success of unions winning significant wage increases, often by waging high-profile strikes, pointed to the need for a labor leader of the year as well.” He states that the choice of Fain was difficult because “we saw numerous candidates from which to choose,” citing Teamsters President Sean O’Brien, SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher, Ted Pappageorge (chief negotiator for the Culinary Workers Union in Las Vegas), and the leaders of the coalition of unions at Kaiser Permanente for supposedly winning “record” contracts.

But Fain rose above his peers by negotiating a deal which included a 25 percent raise over the next four and a half years, the restoration of cost-of-living adjustments, and, Isidore claims, “the end of lower-paid wage tiers and the conversion of lower-paid temporary workers to permanent employees.” Above all, he says, Fain won “the chance to eventually have these contracts cover workers who will be building batteries for electric vehicles, or EVs, at plants now under construction.”

Art Wheaton, director of labor studies at Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations, told CNN, “I thought it was a grand slam. They got massive increases for newer workers. For the existing workforce it was extremely good, better than I would have imagined.”

During the contract struggle, the WSWS exposed these rosy claims as lies. The pay increases and inadequate COLA formula in the UAW contracts are barely above the 22 percent rise in inflation since the last UAW contract in 2019, not to mention the rising living expenses and interest rates autoworkers will confront before the contract ends in April 2028. The hated two-tier system has not been ended, with the period needed to reach top pay only reduced from eight to three years. Significantly, there are also numerous loopholes allowing the companies to skirt promises to convert part-time workers into full-time employees.

Finally, while the UAW achieved its aim of getting a foothold in the EV battery plants, this only means workers will have to pay dues to the UAW bureaucracy for the privilege of working in dangerous sweatshops for substandard pay and benefits.

Within weeks of the UAW contract ratification, Stellantis announced it was cutting nearly 4,000 jobs in Toledo and Detroit, including thousands of part-time temporary workers who Fain claimed would be rolled over to full-time positions. This underscores the fact that the new UAW contract paves the way for a jobs massacre as the automakers convert to EV production and engage in what Stellantis boss Carlos Tavares calls a “Darwinian struggle” that will entail savage job and wage cuts.

The UAW’s “missed goals”

Isidore hardly tries to square his fantasy about the

contracts with the massive opposition they encountered from the rank and file. “Nearly a third of members at Ford and Stellantis voted not to ratify the deals, and 45% of members at GM voted no,” he admits. He says this is because the “UAW missed on a few goals,” including the return of retiree health care coverage and a traditional pension plan for workers hired since 2007,” which the bureaucracy, with Fain’s support, gave up in 2009. The UAW also dropped workers’ demands to reduce the exhausting workweek to 32 hours with no loss in pay.

Isidore relies on the double-talk of Fain to explain away widespread opposition by workers to the UAW’s deals. “I’m proud of the results,” the article quotes Fain as stating, before he adds nonsensically, “I think it’s a testament to the companies that they better understand that workers have high expectations, and they’re tired of watching companies make billions and billions in profits and at the expense of their lives.”

Like Fain, the rest of CNN Business’ candidates for “labor leaders of the year” negotiated contracts that pave the way to massive jobs cuts, which will more than compensate for any meager pay raises. This includes hundreds of job cuts at UPS facilities in Kentucky, Oregon and Indiana, the coming layoff of 1,000 workers at Paramount Global and reports that more than one in four actors have not been called back after the sellout of the 118-day strike by SAG-AFTRA.

If the CNN Business writers were honest, they would say Fain and the rest of the labor bureaucracy are being honored by the corporate-controlled media for services they have rendered to the American ruling class. But there are huge economic and political stakes in perpetuating the myth about the revived “American labor movement.”

This is certainly understood by the Biden administration, which has sought to integrate the union apparatus into its plans for imperialist war abroad and suppression of social opposition at home. Since the outbreak of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, Biden has used the unions to block strikes in the oil refineries, the docks, the railroads, UPS and other critical industries. During the auto contract struggle, White House officials have been in daily communication with the Fain administration, which has also prevented strikes by UAW members at General Dynamics and Allison Transmission that could disrupt the US and Israeli war machine.

In 2023, there were 36 major strikes in the United States involving 1,000 workers or more, up from 23 in 2022, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. A tracker maintained by Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations reports that there were 421 strikes of all sizes, involving 508,000 workers in 2023, more than double the 224,000 recorded being on strike the year before. In

October 2023, 4.5 million days were lost due to work stoppages, the most of any month in four decades.

But the number and scope of these strikes would have been far larger if not for the sabotage of the trade union bureaucracy, which fears nothing more than a merger of the growing strike wave in the US and internationally with the mass antiwar protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

There is a great deal of wishful thinking involved in the media efforts to prop up the UAW bureaucracy. The sellout of the 2023 auto struggle has deeply discredited the Fain administration, which was installed with less than 10 percent of the members’ vote in a bogus election sanctioned by Biden’s Labor Department. The UAW’s betrayal has also further exposed the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, who comprise a significant portion of Fain’s administration.

Throughout last year’s auto struggle, increasing numbers of workers joined the growing network of rank-and-file committees in the factories, which was the most conscious opposition to the UAW sellout. These committees, which are fighting to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor, must now be expanded to lead the fight against the job cuts, the spread of COVID-19 in the factories and other struggles.

The social anger fueled by rising living costs, economic inequality, capitalist exploitation, the sacrifice of millions for corporate profit during the pandemic, and the efforts to make the working class pay the costs of US imperialism’s wars of global conquest will only intensify in 2024. The struggle can and must be united across national borders through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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