

Workers at Daimler Truck North America vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

Rosa Shahnazarian**13 March 2024**

Work at a Daimler Truck plant? Fill out the form at the end to contact us to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee and tell us what your working conditions are like.

Daimler Truck North America workers at six facilities in North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee voted by 96 percent on March 8 to authorize a strike when the current contract expires on April 26 at 12:01 a.m. The company employs nearly 7,000 United Auto Workers members at facilities throughout the South, manufacturing Freightliner trucks, heavy-duty Western Star trucks and Thomas Built Buses.

Daimler Truck is the largest manufacturer of commercial vehicles in the world, with over 100,000 employees across 35 countries. The firm was spun off from German auto giant Daimler AG (subsequently renamed the Mercedes-Benz Group) in 2021. Mercedes remains the largest shareholder.

The strike authorization vote by these workers expresses their overwhelming determination to fight for better wages, benefits and living conditions. The vote is part of a broader upsurge of the class struggle in the United States and the growing militancy of the working class worldwide.

In 2023, Daimler Truck made a record €5.5 billion (\$6 billion) in earnings before interest and taxes (EBIT), a key measure of profit, with the figure jumping 38 percent compared to a year earlier. The company announced that it expected to exceed earnings forecasts for 2024 and raised its dividend by nearly 50 percent, from €1.30 to €1.90 a share. The amount approximately translates to a massive \$1.5 billion windfall for the company's biggest investors.

For the average worker, on the other hand, wages are barely enough to survive, with truck assemblers starting at just \$19.25 an hour at plants in North Carolina.

A worker at the Freightliner plant in Mount Holly, North Carolina, told the WSWS that the issues motivating the strike authorization vote include everything from "insurance to benefits to cost of living to raises to health and safety issues."

He said that workers had been forced to accept massive concessions following the 2008-09 recession, which have yet to be restored, while inflation continued to erode their standard of living. "Food prices have risen. Housing prices have risen. Gas prices have risen."

Another Freightliner worker commented on the militant mood at his plant, saying, "I personally feel like there is a 100 percent chance we will be striking. That is the mood of most of the UAW workers."

To win far higher wages, major improvements to benefits and working conditions and the restoration of all the concessions previously given up by the UAW bureaucracy, everything depends on Daimler workers taking matters into their own hands.

To organize their struggle and link up with workers at auto and heavy-truck plants throughout the region, Daimler workers should form rank-and-file factory committees, led by the most militant and class-conscious workers. These committees will provide a means for workers to discuss and formulate demands based on what workers and their families actually need, such as a 50 percent wage increase, cost-of-living raises fully pegged to inflation, fully funded pensions and retirement healthcare, and more.

Lessons of the UAW's sellout of Big Three workers

The strike vote at Daimler Truck marks the beginning of the first major battle by a section of autoworkers in 2024 and the first since the UAW's so-called "stand-up strikes" at the Big Three automakers last year.

While the Big Three auto contracts have been universally hailed by the media, the White House and the UAW apparatus itself as "historic" victories, they were nothing of the sort. In order to prevent a similar betrayal, Daimler workers should carefully study what actually took place at the Big Three last year.

The UAW only called out a small proportion of its members during the misleadingly named "stand up strikes," keeping the vast majority of autoworkers on the job and continuing to produce profits. Even at their largest point, no more than 30 percent of UAW members at the Big Three were on strike, despite the broad support by autoworkers for an all-out strike encompassing the whole industry.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out at the time, the strike locations were selected by the UAW to have the most minimum possible impact on company earnings. This assessment was borne out in the subsequent profit announcements by the automakers. Ford Motor Co., for example, made \$10.41 billion in profits in 2023, including \$1.1 billion in the fourth quarter, the period during which the "stand up" strike took place.

Similarly, profits at General Motors rose to \$10.1 billion in 2023, an increase of 1.9 percent compared to the previous year,

exceeding its own predictions. Stellantis also reported increased profits in 2023 at a total of \$20 billion, an 11 percent increase over the previous year.

Throughout the contract negotiations, UAW President Shawn Fain—who has falsely presented himself and his administration as reformers and even militants—worked closely with the White House and President Biden, in particular, to contain and suppress the autoworkers' strike. Fain and the entire UAW Executive Board have since endorsed Biden's reelection campaign.

By every measure, the contracts presented to Big Three autoworkers were a sellout. The 25 percent wage increase over the period of the contract is far below the 40 percent or more autoworkers had demanded. By the end of the contracts in 2028, top pay will still be less than what it was in 2007, adjusting for inflation. Likewise, the COLA (cost-of-living adjustment) formula in the contracts does not keep pace with real inflation.

Rather than abolishing tiers as workers had demanded, the contracts only shortened the “progression” period from eight to three years. Company-paid pensions and retiree health benefits were not restored.

In order to ram these concessions through, the UAW bureaucracy shut down the limited “stand-up strikes” before workers had voted on or even seen the contracts, trampling on workers' democratic rights.

Perhaps most significantly, Fain and the UAW leadership were directly caught in lies over what the contract would offer temporary workers, who are highly exploited and low-paid. Fain claimed falsely that all temp workers would eventually be rolled over into full-time positions.

In reality, the companies have accelerated a jobs bloodbath since the enactment of the contracts. Stellantis, in particular, has carried out mass firings of up to 2,3000 temporary workers, while eliminating shifts at factories in Toledo and Detroit. The mass terminations of temps and broader layoffs have provoked growing opposition among workers, including a demonstration organized by the Rank-and-File Committee to Fight Job Cuts outside the UAW's “Solidarity House” headquarters earlier this month.

From the beginning, with the collusion of the UAW bureaucracy, company executives at Ford, GM and Stellantis planned to make up for any pay increases by laying off tens of thousands of workers as part of the transition to electric vehicles.

The record of the UAW in last year's Mack Truck contract struggle was similarly treacherous. First, workers overwhelmingly rejected the first contract presented to them (endorsed by Fain himself) in October by 73 percent, after opposition to the sellout deal was organized by the Mack Trucks Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The UAW subsequently felt compelled to call a strike, which it proceeded to isolate. Within a few weeks, the UAW presented workers with a contract which was virtually identical to the first deal and threatened them with the loss of their jobs if they failed to ratify it.

UAW President Fain and his administration have worked systematically to sabotage a series of struggles since they came in to office, including Clarios battery workers, Big Three and Mack workers, and others. They will be all the more more determined to prevent a powerful strike by Daimler Truck workers this year, given their concern to block any struggle from disrupting Biden's reelection and Washington's accelerating war efforts overseas.

In the run-up to the strike authorization vote at Daimler, the UAW released a video, “Not Like It Used to Be.” Like similar videos produced during the Big Three contract struggle, the UAW showcases the low wages and mistreatment workers confront every day—as though the UAW bureaucracy bore no responsibility for the situation in which workers find themselves.

More insidiously, the video attempts to foment anti-Mexican sentiment and American chauvinism, pointing to the plants Daimler has built in Mexico and stating, “We're just fighting to keep jobs here, in America.” Near the end, the UAW tries to cover up its reactionary appeal to economic nationalism by insincerely adding that Mexican workers are “not to blame.”

In reality, workers at Daimler have been hit with concessions contract after concessions contract in recent decades, for which the UAW apparatus itself bears primary responsibility. Most recently, in 2022, the UAW made an unsuccessful effort to convince workers to agree to reopen the current contract, implement changes demanded by the company, and extend the agreement by three years.

The erosion in workers' standard of living is the result of the collusion of the UAW with Daimler, which has worked with the union bureaucracies to pit workers in different countries against each other in a race to the bottom.

Only on the basis of the unity of workers in the US, Mexico, Canada and throughout the world with an international strategy is it possible to fight against transnational corporate giants and the attacks on workers' living standards. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)—a global network of militant workers' organizations—is building such a movement, with member committees among autoworkers at Ford, GM and Stellantis.

Moreover, in opposition to the UAW's efforts to isolate workers at the truck manufacturing plants from each other, rank-and-file workers at Daimler should appeal to their fellow workers at Volvo and Mack Trucks to fight for their common interests.



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Unite with Daimler Truck workers across North America and internationally!