

# United Auto Workers rally in Three Rivers, Michigan aims to contain growing anger as American Axle workers face looming contract expiration

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United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain held a livestreamed “kickoff” rally for American Axle workers in Three Rivers, Michigan, ahead of the May 31 contract expiration. The event, staged alongside Democratic Party politicians including Michigan Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist and gubernatorial candidate Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson, was aimed at containing growing rank-and-file opposition.

Timed to coincide with ongoing negotiations between UAW Local 2093 and American Axle & Manufacturing, the rally featured assurances from Fain and Region 1D Director Steve Dawes that the union “has workers’ backs.” Notably absent, however, was any acknowledgment of the UAW’s role in imposing wage cuts of up to 50 percent in 2008 or sanctioning the mass layoffs that followed.

Photo caption: UAW President Shawn Fain speaking at American Axle “kickoff” rally in Three Rivers, Michigan March 29, 2026  
Source: UAW

Workers at the Three Rivers facility and across the auto parts industry confront conditions shaped by decades of concessions. In 2008, wages at the plant were slashed in half with workers making up to \$35 an hour. Now top pay is \$22 an hour. While Fain & co. talk about “corporate greed,” many workers contacted by the WSWs exposed the role of the UAW in sabotaging any effective rank-and-file resistance.

**“You want me to have faith in the UAW? It’s always publicity [stunts] with them”**

“The union claims they’re doing their due diligence waiting on the company for three hours to show. Really, they’re submitting to them” an American Axle worker said.

Referencing the last three contracts, the worker stated, “young workers were used for the vote for a small raise. You want me to have faith in the UAW? It’s always publicity [stunts] with them.”

“They don’t canvas the plant for conditions. There’s workers in here working more than 12 hours taking on OT (overtime) to support their families. Some people are capped at \$22 an hour. That doesn’t go for much in today’s market. Lots of people lost their homes in 2008 when they were making \$35 an hour and don’t make half of that now. They set a precedent for us to take less money, then ramping up production so we work 10 plus hours on most lines,” essentially forcing workers to take on excessive overtime in order to make up for the cut in wages.”

“If you asked a newer worker what 30-year pace (30 years to retirement) is, they wouldn’t know. What the union and management created in the plant is people versus people, not unity or camaraderie. That strike fund should be distributed equally for us all. There was a time that workers and the union stood in the way of management.”

These conditions are not unique. The rally at which Fain spoke followed a vote by workers at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw to reject a sellout contract by 96 percent in early April. The sellout deal, endorsed by the UAW, expanded tiers and imposed a starting wage of \$19.05 an hour and increased healthcare costs.

Across the critical auto parts sector—whose “just-in-time” production systems underpin the entire auto industry—workers face intense exploitation, layoffs, and relentless speedup. The strategic position of the parts plants gives workers immense power, raising fears within both management and the union leadership that any independent movement by workers could rapidly spread throughout the industry.

The rally in Three Rivers must be understood in this context: an effort by the UAW bureaucracy to head off the emergence of a broader, unified struggle by channeling opposition back under the control of the UAW apparatus.

## Role of the UAW bureaucracy

Fain used the rally to denounce “corporate greed” while offering empty assurances. While referencing 18 years of “injustice,”—workers losing their homes and lives—he left out the role of the UAW in helping management force through the very concessions contracts responsible for these conditions.

In one revealing moment Fain asserted, “I was national negotiator for Chrysler during the recession, the same thing you all went through. And when the company wanted to take everything from us, and they damn near did.” Fain thus all but admits that he oversaw the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry under the Obama-Biden Auto Task Force that devastated workers’ lives. In attempting to “sell” the 2009 concessions Fain had told Chrysler workers in Kokomo where his home local was based that the restructuring would soon be a bad memory like 1979 when workers saw massive job and wage cuts.

For his part Steve Dawes, UAW Region 1D director put the blame on workers for the 2008 American Axle betrayal. Stating that workers in 2008 “took that hit because you learned and you thought you had to fight another day.”

In reality, the UAW isolated plants in New York state and Michigan for 87 days, starving them on \$200 strike pay. Dawes himself played a role in the betrayal of workers at the Flint Delphi plants in 2007, the 2009 auto restructuring and most recently the Eaton Aerospace strike.

Fain went on to promote the 2023 Stand Up strike strategy—where only a handful of selected plants were called out—while many of the more profitable plants continued operating, producing profits for the companies. Any genuine struggle would have required collaboration with auto parts workers, which have the potential to shut down the entire automotive industry. Since the phony “Stand Up” strike thousands of workers have lost their jobs across the auto industry and wage tiers have continued. Fain has collaborated with both Biden and the fascist Trump to ensure the “competitiveness” of US auto companies against the threat of Chinese domination of electric vehicle production. This involved not only promoting Trump’s tariffs and trade war, but endorsing preparations for shooting war against China and other rivals of USA capitalism. This was behind Fain’s campaign for turning the auto plants into the “arsenal of democracy” and Biden’s boast that the unions were his “domestic NATO.”

The ideological and class origins of Fain, Dawes and all of the so called reformers are rooted in the nationalist and class collaborationist program of the UAW codified by Walter Reuther, which subordinated the interests of workers to an alliance with the Democratic party and defense of capitalism. Reuther initiated the 1950s McCarthyite purge of militant and socialist-minded workers who led the sit-down strikes. Former UAW President Owen Bieber—from West Michigan, began his long UAW career at that time.

In a critical shift, in 1979 UAW President Douglas Fraser rammed through the first ever concessions contracts with Chrysler. In 1982 the UAW imposed the first concessions at General Motors, lowering wages by 3 percent and all but eliminating cost of living adjustments. In 1984 Fraser’s successor, Bieber, openly adopted the program of corporatism and union management partnership, tying the union at the hip to the auto companies through a web of joint structures, which in addition served as a conduit for 100s of millions and billions of dollars into the UAW treasury.

In words repeated by Fain today, in 1983 Bieber had stated, “We have made sacrifices not because we lacked the guts to take the companies on, but because we have the wisdom to know we were better off to protect much of what we had, to fight another day from a position of strength.”

The prominent role of Democratic Party politicians at the rally expressed the union bureaucracy’s function as a key bulwark for capitalism, tying workers to a party responsible for overseeing the economic and geopolitical interests of American capitalism. No one on the platform mentioned the vastly unpopular war in Iran nor the Trump administration’s brutal attacks on immigrants or assault on the Constitution. Sheriff Swanson admonished workers to remember “1936 and ‘37” in Flint, without noting that police and sheriff’s deputies had been mobilized alongside national guard troops and fascists like the Black Legion to smash the strike. He went on to praise the “successes” of the Stand Up strike, calling for “unity on the shop floor,” in other words to unite behind Fain and the UAW apparatus.

#### **War and the diversion of social opposition**

The rally took place with the ongoing illegal war on Iran by the Trump administration funded by both the Democratic and Republican Parties. The same political forces backing the UAW leadership are simultaneously directing vast resources toward military operations abroad.

The Democratic Party has played a particularly foul role in stoking nationalist and anti-Chinese sentiment. In Saginaw, Michigan, Democratic Senator and ex-CIA intelligence officer Elissa Slotkin recently joined with UAW officials and management at auto parts maker Nexteer for a public meeting defending “American manufacturing,” against Chinese “espionage.”

The suppression of strikes and the enforcement of labor discipline at home are inseparable from preparations for war. The auto industry is a key component of the US industrial base and could be converted relatively quickly to military production as it was in WWII. The union bureaucracy functions as a labor police force, ensuring uninterrupted production while diverting workers’ anger into controlled protests and electoral politics.

Raising the context of Trump’s threat to Iran the American Axle worker went on to say, “Yep this is world war. There’s always a benefactor and it’s not the workers on the frontlines. It’s about oil, fuel and the financial backers. Just like the bailouts. I disagreed with that. [Both parties] do a song and dance while they killed this area. We don’t even have proper grocery stores.”

The situation confronting autoworkers in Three Rivers and Nexteer raises the necessity of a break with the UAW apparatus and the development of genuinely independent, rank-and-file based organizations.

The growing opposition among auto parts workers—rooted in years of declining real wages and deteriorating conditions—points to the potential for a broader struggle that challenges not only corporate exploitation but the entire framework of union-management collaboration. These contract struggles are taking place under conditions of war, where the Trump administration is demanding more attacks on workers’ social gains to pay for his proposed \$1.5 billion war budget.

What is posed is not merely a contract fight, but a political struggle against the structures that bind workers to the interests of capital, enforced jointly by the union bureaucracy and its allies in the Democratic Party. The newly formed Nexteer Rank and File Committee, built in opposition to the UAW apparatus, should be a model for workers at American Axle and elsewhere in carrying forward this fight.



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