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USA

UAW Mobilizing, Contract Deadlines Nearing

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As UAW contracts with the Detroit Three expire at midnight September 14, it looks like the companies are far from settling. Having raked in over a quarter of a trillion dollars in the last decade, they are balking at newly elected UAW President Shawn Fain's demand that "Record profits deserve record contracts."

Wearing "End Tiers" and "No Concessions" T-shirts, hundreds of workers and their families turned out to demonstrate their willingness to fight for a good contract at the rally UAW Region 1 on Sunday, August 20. The short program featured Fain, Region 1 director LaShawn English, and U.S. Congressional representative Haley Stevens.

Fain took on the argument that the UAW has set expectations too high. Why is it okay that CEOs reward themselves with 40% increases in their benefits package but wrong for workers to make such a demand?

Wages have stagnated over a generation, the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) given up during the bailout has not been restored, and a tiered workforce means some workers have drastically fewer wages and benefits. Those issues, along with an end to forced overtime, the right to have both job security and a life beyond the workplace, are essential to win as companies restructure.

Negotiations between the corporations and the UAW traditionally begin with the union president staging highly photographed handshakes with the CEOs of each company. That didn't happen this year. Instead, President Fain shook hands with workers at Ford, GM and Stellantis plants, listening to workers' demands and answering questions.

At the same time UAW staff passed out cards and encouraged members to sign up to receive weekly updates by text or email. Since then Fain has been holding short and weekly Facebook Live updates.

In addition to the Facebook Live updates, the UAW's website and Facebook pages have short videos that include workers' stories. The latest features a fourth generation Ford worker who describes her experience as a single mom working as a temp for six years in four different plants before becoming fulltime.

This inclusion and transparency is a sea change from how the UAW leadership functioned over the last half century. It used to be that negotiations were walled off from members, and the UAW Communications Department typically issued "no comment" responses to the media's questions.

In contrast, the newly elected UAW leadership — the first directly elected in a one-person, one vote mail-in ballot — developed a militant No Concessions, No Tiers strategy as the contract deadline rapidly approaches. They have provided a clear list of members' demands, taken on the companies' line, encouraged regions and locals to prepare a contract campaign, and through the union's Organizing Department set up online trainings so that members are empowered to develop actions with co-workers.

Borrowing methods developed during the Teamster contract campaign at UPS, these include having members sign cards in order to receive weekly updates, asking members to wear buttons and red shirts with slogans to work on Wednesdays, encouraging 10-minute parking lot rallies and practice picketing. Whether or not the local leadership is plugged into the campaign, autoworkers are encouraged to be actively involved.

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Fain has called for locals to conduct votes to authorize a strike mandate if negotiations are not progressing. He added, "As a union, we have to lead the fight for economic justice — not just for ourselves but for the entire working class" matched the sentiment of the crowd. Clearly the slogan on the UAW website, "Our generation's defining moment at the Big Three" captures the the mood of autoworkers as September 15 approaches.

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