

While Fain stumps for Harris at DNC, UAW issues strike bluster at Stellantis

Tom Hall
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The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is holding a meeting this Sunday, August 25, at 3:00 p.m. US Eastern Time, "For global action to defend jobs at Warren Truck and around the world!" To register, click here.

The United Auto Workers issued a strike threat and announced it would file grievances Monday afternoon in response to Stellantis abandoning plans to reopen its assembly plant in Belvidere, Illinois.

The union bureaucrats, having kept a guilty silence for months after thousands of layoffs following a supposed "historic" contract, are maneuvering to get out in front of rank-and-file anger before it escapes their control. If there is to be a strike to defend jobs—and there must be—it has to be enforced by a rebellion against the apparatus.

The fact that the bureaucrats have even raised the possibility of a strike in between contracts, when they normally insist that workers abide by "no-strike" clauses they themselves bargained for, shows their extreme fear that workers may take matters into their own hands with or without official approval.

The strike threat at Stellantis comes less than two weeks after the company announced 2,450 layoffs at Warren Truck Assembly Plant, just north of Detroit, reducing the plant to one shift and threatening it with closure. The cuts are the latest in a global jobs bloodbath, which is also threatening 25,000 Italian Stellantis workers and parts suppliers with their jobs.

Also on Monday, General Motors announced 1,000 new layoffs for its white collar workforce, including 600 at the GM Technical Center, also in Warren, Michigan. And 1,000 UAW academic workers at Cornell University have launched a strike over the soaring cost of living. This shows the potential for a broad movement in defense of jobs and living standards, uniting workers across the US and the world.

The layoffs have provoked a furious response among autoworkers, who placed blame squarely on the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy. At a local meeting last Thursday, Warren Truck workers denounced the bureaucrats, especially union President Shawn Fain, who called only a limited strike last year at a few plants before pushing through a contract he and President Biden falsely claimed to be a "historic" victory. Local officials at the meeting evaded workers' questions and simply handed out material on how to collect unemployment.

Workers expressed support for a statement by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees calling for global action to halt the worldwide layoffs. Many also spoke about their support of Joe Kishore, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US president.

"I think it's bull crap," one Warren Truck worker said on Monday. "We'll see what happens. I don't have much faith in the union

because it's too many greedy people taking advantage of the membership, including the union. They may just be selling woof tickets. I'm not buying any."

The timing of the UAW's strike threat was obviously meant to coincide with Fain's appearance Monday at the Democratic National Convention, where he denounced Trump and J.D. Vance as "lapdogs for the billionaire class," while absurdly claiming that the Biden-Harris administration were friends of strikers. In reality, both parties are controlled by the rich.

Fain also denounced Trump for his role in the closure of the GM Lordstown plant in 2019 (in fact, the UAW signed off on the closure), while saying nothing about the potential for Warren Truck's closure.

Fain spent much of his speech grandstanding about being prepared to strike. But only hours before his speech, the union suddenly announced a tentative agreement late Monday in a bid to shut down the strike by over 450 Dakota auto parts workers in Chicago. The union scheduled a vote for 9:00 a.m. Tuesday, ensuring workers have no time to study the contract before voting on it. The only plausible reason for this was to isolate Dakota workers from Stellantis workers.

Will Lehman, a socialist Mack Trucks worker who ran against Fain in the 2022 election, said Monday night:

The Democratic and Republican conventions this summer have illustrated how rotten and bankrupt both capitalist political parties are. Whether it's Sean O'Brien backing Trump or Fain endorsing Harris, Harris and Trump represent different factions of the ruling class. The defense of jobs and the rights of working people requires the rank and file to take the initiative ourselves, to link across plants and fight not for what the corporations want but what we need. Join me in this fight and build rank-and-file committees in your workplace today.

The bureaucracy is doing everything it can to block a strike at Stellantis. In a web page announcing its strike "threat," the union repeatedly emphasized that "our goal is NOT to strike" but to "get the product that Stellantis committed to."

The bureaucracy's most preferred outcome, in other words, is to work out a deal to avoid a strike, likely involving more secret concessions in exchange for investments in Belvidere. It has not even raised the possibility of a simultaneous strike at Ford and General Motors, where mass layoffs are also underway.

The union apparatus is still trying to cover up the fact that the layoffs prove the “wins” they had touted were lies. In a text message sent to all UAW Stellantis workers, the union declared, “Stellantis wants to go back on our 2023 contract wins.”

They told lower-tier supplemental workers that they would be converted to full-time positions; instead, thousands of them have been fired. Rich Boyer, the UAW-Stellantis vice president, recently admitted that the entire UAW executive board knew the layoffs were coming all along. But the union said nothing to ensure the contract’s passage.

The text of the grievance, which the UAW says it has filed at several Stellantis plants, accuses Stellantis of violating the “US Investment letter” from the new contract, in which the company had promised to invest billions in Belvidere and other US plants. In reality, that letter, on page 138 of the contract white book, declares:

The parties understand and agree that the global and North American economies and vehicle markets remain highly volatile ... further unpredictability with volumes and mix is anticipated with the introduction of EV product offerings ...

[A]ccordingly, it is understood that the product investment and employment level numbers set forth above are ... contingent upon plant performance, changes in market conditions, and consumer demand...

In other words, the UAW knowingly included language which allowed the company to renege on its “promises” at any time, for any conceivable reason, while continuing to falsely represent it to workers.

This only underscores that the contract was passed under false pretenses. Workers have every right to consider the deal null and void. A contract which is “enforceable” only on workers while the company gets to change its mind according to “market conditions” is no contract at all.

Significantly, the letter also states that the company only committed to production of the Ram 1500 Classic at Warren Truck through 2024. Because the withdrawal of this model from production is the main reason the company is citing for layoffs at the plant, this means that UAW negotiators knew about but concealed impending layoffs at Warren Truck as well.

In a statement posted on X, Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Jerry White said,

It is noteworthy that the UAW’s grievance stunt does not demand a halt to the job cuts at Warren Truck or the rehiring of the thousands of part-time and full-time workers who have lost their jobs in Detroit, Toledo and Kokomo since the contracts were signed.

The Belvidere reopening was one of the many worthless promises Fain, Rich Boyer & Co. used to sell the pro-company contract. The UAW apparently hoped these facilities could also be used as a dumping ground for the thousands of workers who would be laid off under the new agreement. As the UAW admits in its press release, the cancellation of these plans “impacts Stellantis members nationally, as they will not have those jobs for transfer opportunities in the event of layoffs.”

No amount of appeals to the companies, the UAW

bureaucracy or the Democratic and Republican parties will do anything to protect workers’ jobs and livelihoods. If there is going to be a fight—and there can and must be—workers will have to take the initiative into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees in every factory to prepare joint action to defend jobs. In opposition to Harris and Trump, the Socialist Equality Party insists that workers have the social right to a secure and good-paying job. That is only possible through the fight for socialism, including the transformation of these giant transnational corporations into public utilities under the democratic control and collective ownership of the international working class.

A significant element of the bureaucracy’s campaign is the promotion of “America First” nationalism. In statements last week, Fain accused Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares, who is from Portugal, and other “foreign executives” of ruining a “once-great American company.” On Monday, the union called on the company to honor its commitment to “invest in America.” At the same time, the UAW has completely ignored the global layoffs taking place outside of the United States.

In reality, Stellantis, the “American” auto companies Ford and GM and every other auto company operate their production on a global scale, with factories and supply chains spread across dozens of countries. This underscores that autoworkers need an international strategy to fight the cuts, uniting workers all over the world on the basis of their common interests.

With consummate hypocrisy, Fain accused Trump of “divide-and-conquer” tactics for his scapegoating of immigrants, at the same time that he and the bureaucracy are guilty of the exact same thing. While making a loud noise about a potential strike, they are trying to cripple the working class by dividing workers up between “Americans” and foreigners.

The union bureaucracy aims to whip up American nationalism to prepare public opinion for war. Fain and the bureaucracy of all the major unions are key allies in preparing the home front for war, as acknowledged by Biden who referred to the AFL-CIO last month as his “domestic NATO.”

What Monday’s events make clear is that workers are in a two-front war, against both the company and the bureaucracy, and behind both of those, the capitalist government. This underscores the need for workers to leverage their global power, as the creators of the world’s wealth, in an independent struggle freed from the straitjackets of the union sellouts and pro-corporate politicians.

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