

“There better be a damn fight”: On back foot at rallies, UAW deflects blame for Stellantis layoffs onto foreigners and “mismanagement”

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The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is holding a meeting this Sunday at 3 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 held two rallies Thursday and Friday over Stellantis’ reneging on promises to reopen its plant in Belvidere, Illinois. Thursday’s rally was held at the local hall in Belvidere and was attended by a few hundred people, mostly laid-off workers and retirees. It was addressed by United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain. The second, much smaller rally was held outside the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) near Detroit, and was addressed by lower-level officials.

Last Monday, several UAW locals filed grievances over the Belvidere plant, and the union bureaucracy issued a threat to strike. This is a maneuver to get out in front of explosive anger over mass layoffs. For more than eight months, beginning weeks after the passage of what was falsely hailed as an “historic” new contract, thousands of autoworkers have been losing their jobs.

The bureaucracy has maintained a guilty silence. As Rich Boyer, the vice president for UAW-Stellantis, has admitted, the union knew that supplemental workers to whom the UAW had promised full-time positions would instead lose their jobs.

Two weeks ago, Stellantis announced nearly 2,500 layoffs at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant near Detroit, part of a global attack on autoworkers by every company. At a local meeting, Warren Truck workers placed blame for the cuts squarely on the UAW apparatus.

What is needed is a global strategy in defense of jobs, uniting American workers with autoworkers all over the world. This must be connected to a rebellion against the union bureaucracy, which is helping to enforce the cuts. In raising a strike threat while having no intention of following through, the UAW is precisely seeking to prevent a rank-and-file rebellion.

At the rallies, UAW officials attempted to strike a militant tone. But there were clear signs of nervousness. At Belvidere, every speaker began with a reference to the workplace death of Antonio Gaston, a former Belvidere worker who had transferred to Toledo. There was a palpable sense of anger among attendees in the room over his death.

Even within the relatively friendly Belvidere audience, there were signs of opposition. One laid-off worker said she was furious

that she had been denied a transfer to another plant in 2022. She denounced the unsafe conditions in the factories that contributed to Gaston’s death.

She said: “That kind of s--- shouldn’t be allowed in a strong union,” as opposed to a situation where the union “allows the company to dictate everything to us.”

“So if you’re ready to fight for us, then God bless you. But there better be a damn fight.” She continued, “If it screws us, we follow the contract. When it benefits us, nobody’s fighting... I think I’m not the only one who feels this way.”

Fain, stunned, was forced onto the defensive, his eyes cast to the floor and his voice dropping an octave.

Neither the thousands of supplemental worker firings nor the developments at Warren Truck merited more than a passing mention at either rally. At SHAP, the issue of Warren Truck was raised only when put to the Local 1700 president by this reporter. “It’s sad, it’s terrible. If it could happen there, it could happen here,” he said, without elaborating further.

At Belvidere, Region 4 Director Brandon Campbell asked rhetorically, “It’s Belvidere today, but who’s next?” He did not mention that other cuts were, in fact, already taking place.

Autoworkers everywhere have an obligation to fight for the reopening of the Belvidere plant. But the UAW bureaucracy is focusing exclusively on this in order to deflect attention from layoffs which they have signed off on, and to isolate Belvidere workers from their coworkers fighting layoffs at other plants.

The UAW apparatus is trying to shut down the strike by Dakkota auto parts workers in Chicago in order to isolate them from Stellantis workers. On Monday, the union announced a snap vote on a deal identical to the one the workers had already rejected. When workers rejected it as of Wednesday night, the union leadership announced another vote on an almost identical deal less than 24 hours later. When workers voted this down on Friday, the union announced yet another snap vote for this Sunday.

To fight this sabotage and appeal for broad support, strikers have formed the Dakkota Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

Even while striking a militant pose, UAW officials repeatedly stressed they did not want to strike. “I want to be very clear on this point,” Fain said, “our goal is not to strike. Our goal is to bring jobs and products back to Belvidere.” He promised to “use the grievance procedure to its full extent.” But grievances frequently

go on for months and even years with no resolution.

Fain concluded: “My message to [Stellantis CEO] Carlos Tavares is, you better step up, or the UAW is going to stand up.”

But last year’s “standup strike” produced the sellout contract now being used to lay people off. The union touted \$18.7 billion in “commitments” to new investments, but, in fact, it negotiated language giving the company the right to pull out of these at any time due to “market conditions”—the only reason companies ever make such decisions.

The reality is that the bureaucracy is doing everything it can to prevent a strike, or, failing that, to limit it as much as possible. This was demonstrated by the turnout at the rallies themselves, especially at Sterling Heights. If the UAW officials were serious about their strike threat, they could easily have attracted tens of thousands of autoworkers in southeast Michigan to the SHAP rally, or at least thousands from the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, the largest in the region. Instead, almost no rank-and-file workers attended, and the union sent no high-ranking officials to speak.

Both rallies tried to lay blame for Belvidere entirely on “mismanagement” by Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares. His claim that Stellantis was pulling out of Belvidere over “market conditions” was false, they claimed, because General Motors and Ford were making record profits. But they said nothing about the fact that these companies are also conducting mass layoffs, like every other auto company in the world. They said nothing about the 1,000 layoffs announced earlier this week at General Motors.

Blaming management “incompetence” also serves to deflect attention from the electric vehicle shift, which automakers are using to slash hundreds of thousands of jobs over the next few years. This raises deeper issues than the bureaucracy wants to discuss, including the nature of the capitalist profit system and the global character of the attack on jobs.

Next to Tavares personally, foreigners were responsible for taking American jobs, the UAW officials claimed. This included Tavares himself, who is from Portugal, and other overseas executives who “don’t have a desire of building our company in our country,” as UAW Stellantis Director Kevin Gotinsky put it.

Region 4 Director Campbell attacked Stellantis for “deporting jobs” to Mexico and called for a consumer boycott of vehicles assembled in Mexico. This toxic “America First” rhetoric only serves to divide American workers from their Mexican brothers and sisters, who are engaged in bitter struggles against poverty and have repeatedly appealed to American workers for support.

Then, catching himself in a contradiction, he attacked Trump for sowing anti-immigrant hatred. In fact, Trump’s racist incitement has been the stock-in-trade of the bureaucracy for decades, including the anti-Japanese campaigns in the early 1980s that led to the murder of Vincent Chin.

Significantly, UAW officials in Belvidere also singled out for praise Democratic Party politicians, including Congressman Bill Foster, who was an invited guest at the meeting, for lavishing tax and other financial incentives on Stellantis for reopening the plant. “These guys stepped up... property was picked up. Tax incentives, the money is there for this company,” one official said.

The UAW bureaucrats also continued to stump for Kamala

Harris’ election campaign after Fain spoke at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) on Monday.

During the question and answer period, Fain pointed to the recent Supreme Court decision on Chevron and declared, “this is why this election is so important.”—i.e., the election of Harris. The decision in the Chevron case was only the beginning of a broad attack by the court on other regulations, he said. This is true, but the Democrats have stood idly by while allowing Republicans to stuff the court with an ultra-right majority.

Continuing a theme from his DNC speech, Fain blamed Trump for the closure of GM’s Lordstown plant in 2019, which, in fact, the UAW itself signed off on. He attempted to contrast this to Biden’s record.

If Trump were president we would all have been fired during last year’s “standup strike,” he claimed. (In fact, an even larger nationwide strike at GM took place in 2019, during the Trump administration). Biden had signed off on the UAW contract precisely because it paved the way for job cuts, as has been the case with every major national contract in which the White House has been involved.

What the UAW officials oppose above all is an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to both big business parties, which would also threaten their own positions.

Workers must see through the insincere phrases the UAW bureaucrats are employing. As long as the initiative remains in the bureaucrats’ hands, the only outcome will be more layoffs. Instead, workers must seize the initiative, forming a new rank-and-file leadership in opposition both to management and the union apparatus.

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