

A RURAL WV DEMOCRATIC VIEWPOINT

Let's Celebrate – United Autoworkers' Historic Victory

When President Biden walked the picket line with the United Autoworkers (UAW) it was a powerful political message. He reminded the workers that they had saved the auto industry during the economic crisis of 2008-09. Now that the industry is doing “incredibly well,” Biden said through a bullhorn, “you should be doing incredibly well, too.”

Ex-president Trump later visited a non-union factory and urged workers to vote for him.

Since 1980 when President Reagan's “trickle-down economics” rewarded the owners of capital claiming that they would create jobs that would benefit all, the share of wages for the bottom 90% shrunk, while those for the top 1% skyrocketed 160%.

The loss of workers' bargaining power is the biggest factor. Changes to federal laws made it harder for workers to organize, harder to apply prevailing wage law, and harder to bring labor claims against companies.

As worker power faltered, declines in wages and secure jobs have led to “deaths of despair” in many parts of the country. The WV opioid epidemic is a symptom of this situation.

By supporting unions, President Biden returns to the New Deal, by making workers a “countervailing power” to capital through the government's encouragement of labor unions. Unions provide power in the markets, a voice in the workplace and a vital source of community support.

MAGA Republicans, the Kochs' conservative network, the Chamber of Commerce and major media led by Fox are generally indifferent or hostile to labor.

In a historic victory for labor, this week, the UAW announced tentative settlements with all Big Three automakers – General Motors, Ford and Stellantis. After 6 weeks of targeted strikes, the Big Three have all agreed to the UAW's terms.

The agreements include cost of living increases topping 30% by the time the contracts expire in April 2028, immediate 11% higher starting wages for new hires and the ability to reach the highest tier wage in 3 years instead of the current 8 years. Thousands of electric vehicle workers will be UAW members.

Union leader Shawn Fain called it a victory for working class Americans - as it is. “If we’re going to truly take on the billionaire class and rebuild the economy so that it starts to work for the benefit of the many and not the few,” Mr. Fain added, “then it’s important that we not only strike, but that we strike together.”

In 2008 at the beginning of the Great Recession, union workers made huge concessions to keep the car companies open, giving up guaranteed lifetime pension payments and retiree medical care. The Auto Bailout saved the United States’ auto industry.

Since then the Big Three have flourished. Profits at Ford, GM and Stellantis almost doubled between 2013 and 2022, totaling \$250 billion.

Workers have not flourished. Autoworkers’ wages across the US have fallen by 19.3% since 2008. Meanwhile over just the last 4 years, the total pay for CEOs of GM, Ford and Stellantis jumped 40%, ordinary employees’ pay just 6%.

The UAW victory encourages other workers to join forces in concerted actions for better working conditions, higher salaries, and more worker input into executive decision-making. Most important, it is a critical step to increased equality between the lower and middle classes and the rich who have enjoyed almost all the benefits of America’s economic boom.

As Shawn Fain says, the UAW is “fighting for the entire working class.” And winning.

Deirdre Purdy – Chairperson, Calhoun County Democratic Executive Committee