



The union is dead. Long live the union. Hopes and fears from the “new” UAW strike

by Francesco Nespoli

At some point a union organizes a strike that spreads like wildfire and forces one of the most powerful men in the world to take the workers' side. No ifs, ands or buts.

It would be difficult to find an image that is more evocative than this one and more at odds with the narrative of the worldwide decline of trade unions, which [has been talked about for almost thirty years](#) in institutions, academia and [newspapers](#). That is clearer especially when one considers that the story takes place not in a South American socialist republic, but in the most advanced of capitalist countries. This is what appears to be happening between US President Joe Biden and the US automotive workers' union (United Auto Workers -UAW), which for the past three weeks has been deploying a pressure strategy on Michigan's Big Three automotive manufacturers (General Motors, Stellantis, and Ford) that is unprecedented in many ways.

The Biden administration's strategy shift

According to [some analyses](#), President Biden was forced to change his behind-the-scenes negotiating strategy because of the resonance that the autoworkers' strike was gaining, which had defused more than one conflict in the past. Upon hearing the news of the strike, the President on September 15 released a [video message](#) in which he chanted: “Nobody wants a strike!” He hoped that the UAW would reach a win-win agreement soon and announced that he would send a delegation to facilitate negotiations.

But in an interview with MSNBC two days later, UAW president Shawn Fain blocked the way for the involvement of Biden's envoys by clarifying: “This battle is not about the president. This battle is about the workers.”

Two weeks later, Biden announced that he would join the strike and went to one of the many picket lines organized by the UAW in Michigan, fully adapting to the aesthetics and language of the union struggle. He climbed onto a shallow podium surrounded by a small group of protesters, brandishing a megaphone and repeating the slogan chosen by the union for its campaign: “[record profits means record contracts](#).”



Nothing about the modest staging of a union picket line was changed to reflect the historic significance of the event. For the first time, a president put his “boots on the ground” alongside striking workers (the [AFL-CIO](#) confederation of unions tweeted “History made”). Of course, this effort was always in favor of a “win-win” deal, Biden said. But when a reporter asked him whether the auto workers deserve a 40 percent pay rise (such is the media's summary of the unions' demands), he gave a straight “[Yes](#)”, repeating the answer given by the workers in attendance.

UAW's independence claims

In an increasingly explicit manner, the union itself – which unlike other unions has not yet endorsed Biden in the race for the White House - has been careful since then to remove any doubt as to who was dictating the line. According to a point made in an [analysis](#) published on Jacobin: “It was workers’ militancy, after all, and not acquiescence to political elites, that brought a democratic president to the picket lines.”

Also contributing to Biden's change of strategy is the electoral competition that is heating up in the US well before the election, with the primaries still being several months away. If the UAW's mobilization is blamed for negatively impacting the US economy, it would backfire doubly on a president who won the endorsement of the AFL-CIO and 17 unions in 2020; a President who a few months ago proclaimed himself “[the most pro-union president in American history.](#)” So much so that it has sparked [debate](#) about whether his administration can be credited with triggering a revamp of the trade union movement. Even if there is only a chronological coincidence between Biden’s 2024 presidential bid and his pro-union stance, it is widely reported [in the media](#) that a new push for unionization in the education, health care, catering and retail sectors is proliferating. Suffice it to say that in 2022, according to the [National Labor Relations Board](#), 1,249 union elections were held. This is an increase of almost 50 percent over the previous year. And the results were in favor of

unionization in 72 per cent of the elections. This phenomenon was symbolized by unionization at Starbucks and [Amazon](#).

UAW Communications: Growing from the Roots

According to various [witnesses](#), another factor that contributed to the success of this strike was the leadership style of President Shawn Fain, which Biden himself struggled to interpret and manage.

The style of Fain, the first UAW president directly elected by the membership, is just one of many apparent changes in the union's strategy. The UAW had already learned their lesson in 2015, when its broken promise to close the pay gap between new hires and veterans led to the workers' rejection of the agreement reached with Fiat Chrysler Automobile. The tentative agreement didn't follow a strike, but after iconic kisses and hugs between then chairman Dennis Williams and FCA CEO Sergio Marchionne (see the analysis of the case in F. Nespoli [Framing the Crisis in Industrial Relations. Contrasting the 'Fiat Case' and FCA-UAW Agreement](#)). In a bid to repair the damage, the UAW hired a political communications agency to step up its social media communications, which were heavily criticized by members. Signs of a new awareness were evident in 2019, when the UAW, on returning to negotiate the renewal, targeted GM with a strike and rapid-fire communication on social media (see the reconstruction of this campaign in F. Nespoli, [La comunicazione UAW nella giungla del GM strike](#), in Bollettino ADAPT No. 38/2019).

Compared to 2019, the UAW communication shows some elements of continuity. Even today, demands to narrow the wage gap have largely gone unanswered after 8 years ('end of tier 2'), in spite of promises made. It is now just one of the union's broad demands ranging from the restoration of annual cost-of-living adjustments (the so-called COLA), the four-day working week, the right to strike, the return of traditional pension plans, health care for all UAW pensioners and restrictions on the employment of temporary workers.

Today, however, there are other signs of evolution in UAW communications at the strategic level. The union is characterized by an intense dissemination of images of the strike [in all of its locations](#), aimed at conveying the large scale of the mobilization. Such measures are a must for an initiative that spreads some 7,000 workers over 20 states. While on a programmatic level, Fain's key [video message](#) (3' 40") is quite explicit. The pitch on Twitter says it all: "Our hometowns are under attack." Like a call to arms, with dramatically emphatic editing, Fain begins by pointing to Donald Trump's broken promises to protecting jobs and factories. Then he traces back to the strength of the original union and its achievements. Finally, he declares that he wants to rediscover those roots by innovating conflict strategies. "We are *once again* returning to our roots [...] of holding the line [...] against unchecked corporate power [...]. That's why we are launching a *new kind* of strike."

Hometowns

The combination of origins, threats and change is a strategy clearly identified in the theories of organizational change (see the model emphasized by Rawlins, J. D. (2014). [Mythologising Change: Examining Rhetorical Myth as a Strategic Change Management Discourse](#), Business and Professional Communication Quarterly, 77(4), 453-472. But similar considerations are also expressed in the classic *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* by psychologist Edgar Schein). In this case, this narrative is functional to prefigure a "comeback stronger than before."

The new UAW industrial relations strategy: return to whipsawing

Thus, Fain explicitly emphasizes that the union is pursuing a renewal of its strategy. In fact, these two aspects of UAW communication (frames from the territories and “renewal in tradition”) are consequent to an effective and marked change in negotiating strategy. It is the first time that the union is striking against all three manufacturers at the same time. Traditionally in the US, the auto industry and the UAW employ so-called pattern bargaining. As the union [itself explains](#), this is the dynamic through which a multifirm union opens negotiation with one of the companies to first reach company-level agreement, serving as a benchmark for subsequent negotiations in the industry. Such bargaining occurred in 2015 and 2019.

The reasons that lead companies to accept pattern bargaining [are complex](#). In the US, pattern bargaining in many sectors has declined since the 1980s. So much so that in the early 1990s experts and academics debated whether pattern bargaining was dead (see the [debate between Peter Cappelli and Kathryne Ready](#) in the ILR review). However, pattern bargaining [remained a practice](#) in the automotive sector, and the UAW's new strategy does not necessarily mean its demise; the union could always use an agreement with one manufacturer as leverage in negotiations with the remaining companies.

However, we are certainly observing a new type of path in which the company selected to open negotiations with is not selected *ex ante* by the union on the basis of its weakness (FCA in 2015) or its strength (GM in 2019). While negotiations are ongoing with all three of the Big Three at once, a company is in a sense 'self-selecting' by being more responsive to bargaining demands, while the union assesses the progress of the talks. In the past two weeks, the [UAW has expanded the strike towards GM and Stellantis while sparing Ford](#) because of advances in negotiations with the Deaborn company. But a few days later, the union announced a new expansion of the picket lines, and this time it [excluded Stellantis](#) plants from the initiative while including Ford plants instead.

It was a strategy that created considerable discontent at GM, which through CEO Mary Barra (the one most inclined to expose herself publicly among the CEOs of the Big Three) spoke of “[manipulation](#).” Prof. Chris Martin of the University of Northern Iowa, who has long studied the media framing of the union, wrote on Twitter that if for years the companies have been [whipsawing](#), i.e. making the plants compete with each other to find the workers most willing to make concessions, now it is the union that is making the three companies compete with each other.

Rather than a “reverse whipsawing”, it is in fact a return to the original meaning of the word, which in the past referred to trade union behavior rather than management behavior: “a bargaining tactic in which an attempt is made to spread wage and other concessions from one employer to another” (see the enlightening article by Greer, I., & Hauptmeier, M. [Management Whipsawing: The Staging of Labor Competition Under Globalization](#), ILR Review, 69(1)).

Through the chaos (as Fain called it in an [off-the-cuff message](#)) produced on the “widespread” chessboard of this “new kind of strike.” The union is thus reinterpreting its origins in concrete terms, forcing the roadmap to shift from “management whipsawing” to “union whipsawing.”

Between media, politics and the green transition: uncertain outcomes

It is difficult to say whether this strategy, which is capable of attracting ample media and political attention, is a sign of a consolidation of the above-mentioned union renewal and whether it will therefore help to boost the union's fortunes in the West.

In spite of its bravado, the UAW is also under great pressure to reach an agreement. Already on September 11, before the strike started, it the union had lowered its demand for a wage increase to 36% from 40%. Moreover, each day spent striking is costly to the UAW, which in July 2022 raised the strike allowance to [USD 500 per week](#). This granted the increase in allowance to those already receiving unemployment benefits. Perhaps this is also why Fain stated that the UAW will not allow “the big three to drag out negotiations for months.”

This means continuing to load the spring of workers' expectations. As the then UAW spokesperson Brian Rotenberg explained to me in 2015, it is often paradoxically easier to bargain in times of crisis than in times of prosperity, because in the latter case, workers' expectations are higher and it is more difficult to meet them. As already mentioned, the UAW has been well aware since then of the risks of a mismatch between reality and slogans, since the facts and negotiation results can belie any communication campaign.

Also welded into this pressure on negotiating performance is the communication of managers (especially GM) and the conservative media (see the [triangular back-and-forth](#) between Mary Barra, the certainly not pro-union journalist Michael Weyland and the UAW). The aforementioned Professor Chris Martin in a book published in 2019 entitled *No Longer Newsworthy* analysed the long decline in media interest in labour issues that preceded the current pro-labor political season. The book offered mainstream media recommendations on how to embrace the working class again as critical to their audience and democratic function. For it is not necessarily the case that “more media resonance” means “the favor of public opinion” (although more than one poll has confirmed that this is now in [the majority in favor](#)).

Nor is it a foregone conclusion that the outcome of the strike will consolidate the widening rift between the left and the workers. While the majority of these seem to have supported and endorsed Biden's election, the populist competition remains high. Bernie Sanders was the first leader to declare, right [from Detroit](#), that he would stand by the UAW if it called a strike. The day after Biden appeared at the picket line in Van Buren, Donald Trump held [a rally in Clinton](#) (i.e. still in Michigan) to reiterate how much support he has among the auto workers, convinced by his strategy of transition to electric motors, which is markedly different from that of the Democrats.

If we then look at the international level, the UAW's effective capacity to drive the international trade union movement seems very limited. It is true that the European trade union (ETUC) has called on the political leaders of European countries to do as Biden did. It is also true that the UAW has sent messages to sister organizations in Europe inviting them to join the struggle (as it did to [Fiom](#)) “because these are multinational companies.” This is the same union that, along with other major unions, sent a [letter to President Biden](#) urging him not to back down in the face of pressure from [European institutions and trade unions](#). These entities are concerned about the [ecological transition](#) incentives in the Inflation Reduction Act, which could lead to a capital flight from the EU to the US. The unions branded the European remarks as retrograde.

Solidarity for the just ecological transition does not even exist in the room of US-EU relations, and if this is the cornerstone on which the trade union's ability to accompany and protect workers through epochal change rests, the UAW strike seems to have little to say to the world.

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