

U.A.W. Strike Gains Could Reverberate Far Beyond Autos

Experts said the union's new contracts could set precedents that give labor advantages when bargaining contracts and organizing workers.

By Noam Scheiber
New York Times

Laying out a tentative contract agreement to end a six-week wave of walkouts at Ford Motor, the United Automobile Workers president made an unusual pitch to other labor unions.

"We invite unions around the country to align your contract expirations with our own," the U.A.W. leader, Shawn Fain, [said Sunday night](#).

"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."

While it remains to be seen whether other unions follow the U.A.W.'s lead, Mr. Fain's invitation highlights the sweeping ambition of the union's strategy during the recent strike, the first to target all three Detroit automakers simultaneously.

Beyond seeking the largest wage and benefit increases in decades — and a reversal of the concessions the union made during the companies' downturn, such as lower wage tiers for newer workers — Mr. Fain repeatedly spoke of fighting for "the entire working class."

Labor experts said the proposals that union negotiators agreed to with Ford, General Motors and Stellantis, the parent of Jeep, Ram and Chrysler, had produced gains that could in fact reverberate well beyond the workers that the union represented.

"It is a historic and transformative victory by the U.A.W.," said Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Dr. Lichtenstein said that winning substantial gains through a strike in a critical industry demonstrated the benefits of work stoppages after decades in which workers had been taught to regard strikes warily.

"Fain says: 'Hey, strikes work, solidarity works; we're more unified now than before the strike,'" he added. "I think that's a powerful argument unions can take elsewhere."

Even before the strike ended, unions at other companies appeared to be doing just that.

In an interview in late September, David Pryzbylski, a lawyer who represents employers, said union officials in two separate contract negotiations had invoked the U.A.W. when discussing the possibility of a strike. “Outside the U.A.W., it’s putting wind in their sails,” Mr. Pryzbylski said. “They may be blustering, but I am seeing it already trickle down.”

A [recent report](#) by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce raised concerns that an emboldened labor movement was increasing strike activity and “causing collateral damage to a host of local businesses and communities” by harming the economic ecosystem that depended on automakers and other employers.

The element of strategy that the U.A.W. brought to its strike may also prove instructive to other workers and unions. Rather than ask all employees to strike at once, the union started small, with one key plant at each of the Big Three, then ramped up as it sought to bring additional pressure. The U.A.W. refrained from expanding the strike when it felt a company was bargaining productively, and it expanded to a highly valuable plant when it felt a company was dragging its feet — in both cases, to create an incentive for the companies to engage with the union.

The approach may not translate perfectly to other industries, such as retail and hospitality, that are harder to disrupt with the loss of a small number of locations. But Peter Olney, a former organizing director with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, said the strategy was more widely applicable than it might appear at first glance.

He cited the possibility of organizing and striking at coffee bean [roasting plants and distribution centers](#) for a company like Starbucks, where workers at hundreds of retail stores in the United States have organized over the past few years. “They have 9,000 locations, there’s a lot of redundancy and replication,” Mr. Olney said, referring to company-owned stores in the United States. “But there are some choke points in that system, too.”

And it is difficult for service-sector industries to send operations offshore in response to labor unrest, because proximity to customers is critical. By contrast, the U.A.W. may have to contend with the risk that companies shift production to Mexico as labor costs increase.

“That’s where the international solidarity aspect of it comes in — the need to build up a cross-border network with Mexico,” Mr. Olney said. Last year, workers at a large G.M. plant in the country [voted out](#) a union [accused of colluding](#) with management in favor of an independent union.

In some ways, the recent U.A.W. effort builds on the gains made by unions involved in other high-profile standoffs. To resolve a nearly five-month strike with Hollywood writers in September, major studios [agreed](#) to a set of restrictions on the use of artificial intelligence. The agreement was a break with employers’ typical insistence that management should have control over technology and investment decisions.

The tentative U.A.W. contracts award the union more influence over such decision-making as well — for example, by allowing workers to strike against the entire company over the threat of a plant shutdown before their contract has expired. The union also successfully pressed Stellantis to reopen an Illinois plant that the company had closed.

Mr. Pryzbylski, the management-side lawyer, said that while such strike provisions and plant reopenings are not unheard of, they are uncommon.

Dr. Lichtenstein said securing these gains in such a high-profile context could prompt employees at other companies to demand a say in decisions that their employers had typically characterized as management prerogatives. “It restores a kind of social and political character to investment decisions,” he said. “It’s something the left has wanted for over a century.”

In other cases, the U.A.W. managed to extract concessions at plants where it doesn’t yet represent workers — another unusual win that could be mimicked by fellow unions. Ford agreed that U.A.W. members would be allowed to transfer into battery and electric vehicles plants under construction in Michigan and Tennessee, and that these plants would fall under the union’s national contract if the workers unionized there. According to the U.A.W., that would happen without the need to hold a union election at either site.

Madeline Janis, co-executive director of Jobs to Move America, a group that seeks to create good jobs in clean technology industries, called these arrangements a “huge historic, unprecedented deal” for helping to ensure that the E.V. transition benefited workers.

U.A.W. officials say that adding new members is critical to the union’s survival, and that the Big Three contracts will provide a major boost to these efforts because organizers can point to large concrete benefits of unionizing.

“We’re not going to win a contract victory this big in the future if we’re not able to start organizing, especially in the E.V. sector,” said Mike Miller, a U.A.W. regional director in the Western United States. “It has to involve Tesla, Volkswagen and Hyundai.”

But some experts said the momentum of the recent contracts could help organizing campaigns that were even further afield. “It’s not just personal vehicle manufacturing — it’s the fleets of delivery vans, big electric buses and trains,” said Erica Smiley, executive director of Jobs With Justice, which helps workers seeking to unionize and bargain collectively.

Ms. Smiley noted that many of these companies, just like electric vehicle manufacturers, had received public subsidies, creating an opportunity for organizers to appeal to politicians for help raising pay and improving benefits so that they more closely resembled what the U.A.W. just won.

“The administration is investing in these industries,” she added. “The question is how to use this to raise the floor.”