

Bill Kaplan: UAW strike wins for regular folks

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The United Auto Workers' (UAW) "Stand Up Strike" win is the most important union victory for regular folks in a generation. It is inspirational for working people everywhere, including Wisconsin. Solidarity trumped identity group politics. Workers and the middle class won a solid victory over the moneyed elite. Democracy came out on top. A roadmap for all unions.

Newly elected UAW President Shawn Fain, first UAW leader elected directly by UAW members, led a brilliantly executed strike against Ford, General Motors and Stellantis (Chrysler) with targeted-staged walk-outs, rather than a full scale strike against just one of the Big Three automakers. Fain was pitch perfect with the American people, the press and importantly, with UAW members. The union defied the naysayers and secured trailblazing contracts: 25 percent pay increase (higher when including restored regular cost-of-living adjustments), ending the two-tiered wage structure which paid recently hired workers much less, new battery factories will be included in the contracts with workers likely joining UAW, and the idled Stellantis factory in Belvidere, Illinois - bordering Wisconsin - will be reopened.

Wisconsin UAW workers who struck in Hudson and Milwaukee are included in the new contracts. It was a stellar moment when Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin joined the UAW picket line in Milwaukee. A Baldwin press release said: "As these big auto companies rake in record profits and their CEOs take home millions, it is high time the dedicated workers who make it all happen get their fair share and are treated with dignity and respect. ... I (Baldwin) stand in solidarity with the striking workers" Again, Baldwin is in the corner of regular folks in Wisconsin.

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President Joe Biden, in an historic first, joined the UAW picket line in Michigan. He said: “You deserve what you’ve earned. And you deserve a whole hell of a lot more than you’re getting paid now.” Trump later appeared at a nonunion factory in Michigan, pretending he supported striking workers while attacking Biden and the UAW. But one Trump attendee said: “I may not support Biden, but it’s important for the president of the United States to show interest and that you care about the UAW. That goes a long way” (Washington Post).

Trump just bloviates, but Biden acts. He pushed Congress to pass the PRO Act to give workers more protection from employer retaliation while organizing a union. More recently, the National Labor Relations Board, led by Biden appointees, issued a “new framework” to make it much easier for workers to exercise their legal right to organize a union and bargain collectively.

Finally, UAW President Fain is not resting on the union’s newly won laurels: “When we return to the bargaining table in 2028, it won’t be just the Big Three. It will be the Big Five or Big Six” (Tesla, BMW, Hyundai, Toyota or Volkswagen). Like the Flint, Michigan sit-down strike in the 1930s, the “Stand Up Strike” may lead to a resurgence of labor unions in America, including Wisconsin. Regular folks support unions.

Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.