



Since the financial crash, wages for workers in vehicle manufacturing have fallen by nearly twenty per cent, adjusted for inflation. The Big Three have earned hundreds of billions of dollars in profit. Photographs by Philip Montgomery for The New Yorker

A REPORTER AT LARGE

# WILL THE U.A.W. STRIKE TURN THE

# RUST BELT GREEN?

*A historic walkout against the Big Three automakers could shape the trajectory of one of America's most politically salient regions.*

By **Dan Kaufman**

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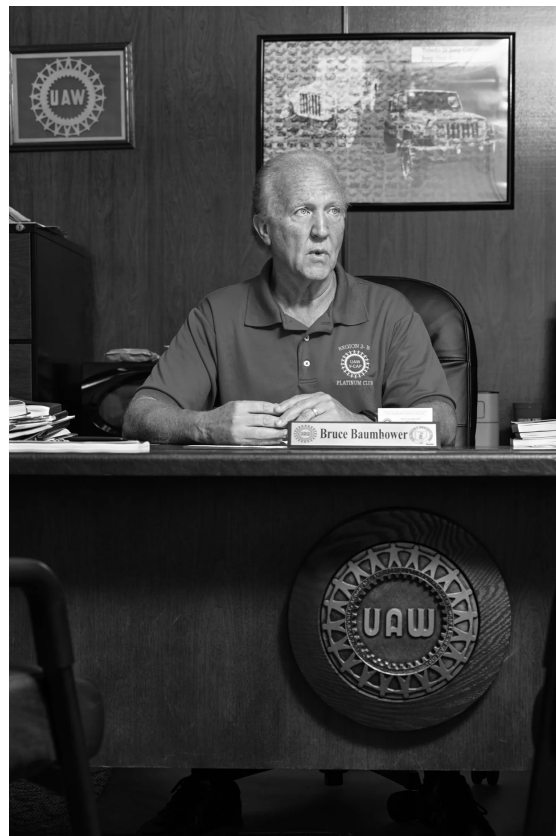
Late in the summer, several hundred autoworkers jammed into the auditorium of United Auto Workers Local 12, in Toledo, Ohio, for a monthly meeting. Local 12 is the largest amalgamated union in the country, representing more than ten thousand people, including nearly six thousand at a Jeep factory in town. Typically, the monthly meeting attracts a far smaller crowd, but word of a possible strike had been circulating among U.A.W. membership. The union's contract was set to expire three weeks later, at midnight, and negotiations between the union and representatives of the Big Three—General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis (Chrysler and Jeep's parent company)—were going nowhere. Bruce Baumhower, who is sixty-eight years old and has been president of the local for more than three decades, got to the lectern. He has wisps of reddish-gray hair and the large forearms of a former assembly-line worker. He described how, not

long ago, the union had given up hard-won wages and benefits to help save the industry in a period of crisis. Those compromises had been exploited by corporate greed, he said; close to a third of the unit still earned less than sixteen dollars an hour. The starting rate had barely budged in fourteen years. “That’s all going to change now,” Baumhower said. “Now it’s our time!”

The crowd exploded, applauding and yelling. Mike Sawaya, whose family has worked at the plant for three generations, was leaning against the wall behind the lectern. He was eight years old when he first met Baumhower in the same auditorium: he’d been so nervous that he spilled two plates of chili mac onto his lap. “Bruce let it rip,” Sawaya said. “This is what he’s known for.” Baumhower told me later, in his office, “It probably wasn’t a very professional speech—I just said the scam’s up.”

On September 14th, the U.A.W.’s new president, Shawn Fain, called the first simultaneous strike against all Big Three companies in the union’s history. He deployed a new tactic—the “stand-up strike”—which initially called for only one assembly plant from each company to walk out. The name was a reference to the sit-down strikes of the nineteen-thirties, in which workers occupied plants to prevent management or strikebreakers from operating the machinery. The stand-up tactic, as opposed to walking out all at once, would allow the U.A.W. to stretch its eight-hundred-and-twenty-five-million-dollar strike fund, so that the strike could go longer and wider if progress wasn’t made.

Baumhower, who started at Jeep in 1972, told me that he was pleased his plant was one of the first. “We *wanted* to be the target,” he said. “We think we have the most injustice going on at the shop floor.” The plant’s percentage of “supplemental,” or temporary part-time, employees—some of whom have been working that way for five or six years, with no guaranteed path to full-time employment—is one of the highest in the country, he said. A member’s son recently came to see Baumhower about getting a job. Baumhower assured him that it would be no problem—the company needed more than a hundred new workers. “The kid goes, ‘Yeah, how much?’ ” Baumhower recalled. “I said, ‘Fifteen seventy-eight.’ He says, ‘Oh.’ I said, ‘What’s the matter?’ He said, ‘I’m working at Arby’s dropping fries for seventeen dollars. So I can drop transmissions in a car for fifteen or drop fries into a basket for seventeen?’ He’s still at Arby’s. Pretty smart kid.”



Sherry Lee Linkon, a professor at Georgetown University, coined the phrase “the half-life of deindustrialization” to describe the long ripple effects of factory and mill closures.

Bruce Baumhower, the president of Local 12, said that he was pleased his plant was one of the first to go on strike. “We wanted to be the target,” he said.

The 2007-08 financial crisis was followed by a government bailout and a supervised restructuring of Chrysler and G.M., which forced U.A.W. workers across the Big Three to make major concessions to keep their jobs—and to keep the companies solvent. Gone was the annual cost-of-living adjustment and the health insurance for retirees, many of whom are not old enough to qualify for Medicare. Even break time was reduced from six minutes to five. Most significant was the introduction of a two-tiered pay system, under which new hires would start at half of what existing workers made. New hires also would not receive a pension.

Since the crash, average hourly wages for workers in vehicle manufacturing, adjusted for inflation, have fallen by nearly twenty per cent, according to a recent study by the Economic Policy Institute. The automakers, meanwhile, have seen enormous financial success. By 2013, the Treasury Department had sold its last stakes in Chrysler and G.M. and lifted restrictions on executive compensation. In the past decade, profits at the Big Three have almost doubled. The companies have spent billions on stock buybacks, and C.E.O. pay has gone up by forty per cent; Mary Barra, the C.E.O. of G.M., earned twenty-nine million dollars last year.

The Big Three aren’t a monolith. Last Wednesday, Ford, which is

reputed to have the best relationship with its workers, reached a tentative agreement to end the strike at its factories. The terms included a twenty-five-per-cent raise over a four-and-a-half-year contract, an end to wage tiers, and a right-to-strike provision over plant closures, a first for the U.A.W. An agreement with one company generally pressures the other two to settle along similar lines.

The strike comes amid a wider revival of labor. Though union membership is at a historic low, in the past few years the number of striking workers has reached its highest level in decades. Recent walkouts by members of SAG-AFTRA and the Writers Guild and by workers at Kaiser Permanente have enjoyed broad public approval. According to a Gallup poll, sixty-seven per cent of Americans now support labor unions, nineteen points higher than in 2009. Moreover, the poll showed that seventy-five per cent sided with the U.A.W. in its battle with the auto companies. Still, there have been pockets of antipathy. Jim Cramer, an analyst at CNBC, implied that Fain was a Trotskyite and encouraged the auto companies to move their entire production process to Mexico.

Recently, at Baumhower's striking Jeep plant, a group of workers from the Wrangler paint line were marching in front of one of the main entrances of the three-and-a-half-million-square-foot complex. The mood was defiant. They chanted, "No justice, no Jeeps!" and shouted as drivers on Interstate 75 zipped past, honking. Earlier, someone had incinerated a copy of the old U.A.W. contract in a burn barrel. Todd Gibson, the strike captain on duty, kept the workers walking, back and forth, for six hours. Semi trucks were still making deliveries to the

plant, slowly nosing forward through the picket.

“Thirty-eight years in jail,” Gibson said with a laugh, when I asked how long he’d worked at the plant. “Not everybody is molded to be a factory worker. You have to be able to handle the long-term, repetitive nature, let your mind go into a different place.” This was the first time during his tenure that the plant had been on strike. What changed? He pointed to Amy Jo Luedtke, a middle-aged woman with bleached-blond hair. Luedtke was in elementary school when she decided that she wanted to work at the plant one day, after driving in a friend’s parents’ “naked” Jeep (no doors, no top). She’d been on the paint line for four years, as a supplemental. “I’m here doing the same thing they’re doing,” she said, glancing at her co-workers. “I should get the same thing they’re getting.” Gibson told me, “See, I’m on the end of this show, right? These guys are just starting it. I want to make it *good* for them.”

**O**n Halloween night, 2021, Jennifer Fultz went trick-or-treating with her seven-year-old daughter, Aria, and her ten-year-old son, Jordan, in her home town of Rockford, Illinois. The kids were both dressed as Pikachu. Fultz, who has long chestnut hair, hazel eyes, and thick glasses, had to finish the rounds early. She brought the kids home, hugged and kissed them goodbye, packed up her car, and, with her mother and her two cats, began the six-hour drive to Toledo. The next day, she was starting a new job at the Jeep plant there. Though the children would soon join her, she was nervous and heartsick. “I worried that, if something were to go wrong, it was just me and my

mom in a brand-new city,” she said. “I was praying to God that I had made the right decision.”

For years, Fultz had worked at a Stellantis plant outside Rockford, building Jeep Cherokees. The company laid people off in waves, then idled the plant completely, eliminating the remaining thirteen hundred jobs. The next line of Cherokees would reportedly be built in Toluca, Mexico, making the plant another casualty of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Since NAFTA went into effect, in 1994, it has cost the United States nearly a million jobs, a significant percentage of them in vehicle and parts manufacturing, according to a study by Robert Scott, a recently retired economist at the Economic Policy Institute. NAFTA paved the way for other similar agreements, most notably one that established permanent normal trade relations with China, facilitating its entry into the World Trade Organization, in 2001. Scott estimates that the ensuing trade deficit cost the United States nearly four million jobs, most of them in manufacturing, which tended to be more heavily unionized than other industries. Even the spectre of outsourcing has provided corporations with a powerful cudgel: Stellantis recently threatened to move production of its Ram 1500 to Mexico, too, according to one of the U.A.W.’s lead negotiators. (In a statement, Stellantis said, “We are not commenting on production sites for future products.”)

In the past twenty years, the Big Three have closed more than sixty American plants. Fultz told me that her previous plant had been a “melting pot” of autoworkers from shuttered factories in New York,



Maryland, and Missouri. Before getting hired by Stellantis, she had worked three other jobs—at Kohl’s, at Papa John’s, and at Subway, as a supervisor—and still could not afford to move out of her mother’s house. “There are not a lot of good jobs back home,” she said. “Once Stellantis pulled the plug, that was it for the whole community.”

Fultz works ten-hour shifts, six or seven days a week. The long hours have taken a toll on her physical health. A “little gremlin,” she said, lives on her shoulder. (Fultz spent a year and a half in the body shop, where she lifted and pulled heavy parts all day.) “I can’t hold my daughter, who is light as a feather, for more than five seconds, because my hands go numb,” she told me. Last year, her mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. Fultz takes care of her but is guilt-stricken that the rest of her mother’s family and friends are so far away. “I know that my family is suffering because I brought them here,” Fultz told me, as tears started to stream down her face.

Her career in the auto industry has been marked by a sense of delayed

recompense for the bailout concessions. “We were promised that future generations would be able to get back what was given up,” she said. “And that never came. I don’t have a pension. I don’t have health care when I retire. I’m thirty-three, and my body is broken down already. That’s not the American dream. The American dream isn’t to work sixty, seventy hours a week in a factory, making a billionaire more billions, while I neglect time with my kids, time with my mother, time with my mister—just time. Then for the billionaires to say, ‘You’re being greedy’—am I?”

In late September, President Joe Biden announced that he would visit a picket line in Michigan. Fultz met him there. “We fist-bumped,” she recalled. “I told him, ‘Please keep jobs in America, Mr. Biden.’ His response was ‘That is why we need E.V.s.’ ” Biden wants electric vehicles to make up two-thirds of the domestic market for passenger cars by 2032. He has also declared his intention to be the “most pro-union President in American history.” The U.A.W.’s strike, in part, aims to push him to fulfill both promises, to enact what the union calls a “just transition.”

The Biden Administration has called for tens of billions of dollars to support electric-vehicle manufacturing. Various federal laws and programs have established incentives for companies to build E.V.s and their batteries in America and to staff those plants with union workers. (The House version of the Inflation Reduction Act, passed last year, included a forty-five-hundred-dollar tax credit for buying union-built E.V.s, but it was stripped from the Senate version at the behest of Joe Manchin.) “If our tax dollars are going to finance this

transition, then labor can't be left behind," Fain said recently, on "Face the Nation." Some prominent Democrats and political commentators have suggested otherwise. "If climate change is a central problem, we should want climate-change technologies produced as inexpensively as possible," Lawrence Summers, the Treasury Secretary under Bill Clinton, said last month.

In 2022, G.M. partnered with a Korean electronics company to form a new venture called Ultium Cells, which opened a non-union battery plant behind a shuttered assembly complex in Lordstown, Ohio. The companies received two and a half billion dollars in low-interest federal loans. But the starting pay at Ultium was only \$16.50 an hour. (In September, it was raised to twenty dollars.) So far, one worker has died from injuries sustained at the plant. Others have been hospitalized for electric shock and for possible chemical exposure; there have also been reports of dizziness, nausea, vomiting, and burns. (A technician had to be wheeled out on a gurney after being "sprayed in the face with toxic electrolyte.")

In December, workers at the plant voted overwhelmingly to unionize, but have so far been unable to secure a contract. According to a U.A.W. safety report, there were twenty-two injuries reported to OSHA in the first five months of 2023. A few weeks ago, federal regulators announced their intention to fine the company nearly three hundred thousand dollars. "It's a dangerous facility, much more than Lordstown," Dave Green, a U.A.W. regional director, who worked on the assembly line at the old complex, said. The U.A.W. found a fifty-per-cent-higher incidence of OSHA violations there than in traditional

G.M. plants. (A spokesperson for Ultium said, “All safety concerns are taken seriously, investigated, and addressed promptly.”)

Last year, Jim Farley, Ford’s C.E.O., predicted that fewer workers will be needed to manufacture electric vehicles, given that their power trains don’t require engines and thus have significantly fewer moving parts. Other experts disagree. A study last year by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University, for example, estimated that producing electric vehicles will actually require more jobs in the short and medium term, because the necessary components are more complicated to make, even if there are fewer of them. In any event, most of the newly announced battery plants will be built in Southern states that are hostile to labor. In June, the federal government awarded Ford and a partner company a nine-billion-dollar loan to build three battery plants in Kentucky and Tennessee. Fain criticized the Biden Administration for failing to pressure the companies to commit to using union labor.

Fultz and I walked out to the parking lot of Local 12, so she could show me her bright-blue Wrangler. Its dashboard, like those of several other Jeeps in the lot, was lined with toy ducks—tokens of good will that fellow Jeep owners give to one another, in a practice known as Jeep ducking. “I have a love-hate relationship with Stellantis,” Fultz said. “I need them to stay financially successful. But even if they were to close their doors today—and I hope they never do—I would probably go to G.M. or Ford. As crazy and unstable as the automobile industry is, there’s something about knowing that a family is sitting in a car I could have built.”

The day after Biden's visit to the Michigan picket line, Donald Trump showed up at Drake Enterprises, a non-union automotive-parts manufacturer in Macomb County, forty miles away. A lectern was set up in front of a row of enormous shelving units piled high with gear-shift levers and other transmission parts. Secret Service officers shared security responsibilities with heavily tattooed, bearded men wearing black gloves and olive-green shirts. Campaign volunteers passed out signs that read "UNION MEMBERS FOR TRUMP" to anyone who would take them.

Tony Brouckaert, a self-employed tool-and-die maker, was standing by himself in the crowded room. He used to work in a hydraulic-tool factory, which has a union. He'd tried to get rid of it. "I'm a firm believer that, if you're a hardworking employee, you don't need the union," he told me. Nevertheless, most of his political grievances were economic, and rooted in the disappearance of benefits that unions once reliably provided. His job has left him with a bad shoulder, but Obamacare is too expensive, so he is waiting until he's sixty-five and on Medicare to have it treated.

After several hours, Trump entered to Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." and an ecstatic standing ovation. His speech, at turns fluid, deceptive, and frightening, called for a "revival of economic nationalism" and stoked rising economic anxieties. "I put everything on the line to fight for you," he said. "I have risked it all to defend the working class from the corrupt political class." He fixated on NAFTA, a persistent theme of his campaigns, especially during stops in Rust Belt

states, whose political swings have determined the winners of the past two Presidential elections. Trump called NAFTA “the worst trade deal ever made” and boasted about having renegotiated it in 2018. (The new deal preserved much of the original one; it has been called NAFTA 2.0.) He repeatedly emphasized the threat of electric vehicles. “For autoworkers, Biden’s forced transition is a transition to hell,” he said. “It’s a transition to unemployment.” The current strike was meaningless, he added, because “under Biden’s mandate the entire car industry will be packed up and shipped to China.” Though not many U.A.W. members were present, he implored the crowd to lobby Shawn Fain to endorse him.



During a speech in Detroit, Shawn Fain, the president of the U.A.W., framed the union as part of an “arsenal of democracy” fighting corporate greed.

In 2016, exit polls showed that Trump won two-thirds of voters who believe trade with foreign countries takes away American jobs; this helped him flip Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, which he carried by fewer than eighty thousand total votes. Fultz told me that she felt she had “the most job security when Trump was in office.” But Trump’s political career has been marked by intense hostility toward labor. In 2015, when campaigning for President, he told the *Detroit News* that automakers should pursue a kind of intra-national NAFTA, moving plants out of Michigan to parts of the U.S. where labor was cheaper, and then returning to the state after workers there had become desperate enough to accept lower wages. “You can go to different parts of the United States, and then ultimately you’d do full circle,” he said. “We can do the rotation in the United States—it doesn’t have to be in Mexico.”

During Trump’s Presidency, the country lost a hundred and seventy thousand manufacturing jobs and close to seven thousand factories. In 2017, Trump appointed Peter Robb, a management-side lawyer, as general counsel to the National Labor Relations Board. Robb had served as Ronald Reagan’s lead attorney when Reagan fired more than eleven thousand air-traffic controllers, effectively breaking their union and igniting a decades-long attack on labor by the right.

When Trump finished his speech, it was pouring outside. Standing in the rain, waiting to wave on the motorcade, was Isaiah Goddard, a



U.A.W. member who works at a Ford parts plant. “I think it was a very beautiful speech, from the heart,” he said. “It shows that he cares about us autoworkers.” Goddard was eager to take up Trump’s challenge: “I’m going to do everything I can to talk to Shawn Fain and try to get him to endorse Donald Trump.”

Two days later, a “solidarity convoy” of Broncos, Jeeps, and Colorados gathered in the parking lot of Local 51, on Detroit’s East Side. The procession cruised toward the city’s downtown, honking to diverse approval: a Black man walking along a deindustrialized artery raised his fist; in tony Indian Village, two white joggers stopped to applaud. Union members had already convened in the parking lot of Solidarity House, the convoy’s destination and the headquarters of the U.A.W. Built in 1951, the low-slung modernist structure is situated on a site along the Detroit River which once contained Edsel Ford’s mansion, orchard, and garden. Loudspeakers in the parking lot blasted DJ Khaled’s “All I Do Is Win” as a group of workers began dancing wildly.

Fain grabbed a microphone and jumped onto the bed of a Ram pickup. He has short-cropped gray hair and wears glasses; he looks a bit like a high-school shop teacher. He began by talking, in a measured drawl, about a plan conceived by Walter Reuther, a former president of the U.A.W., to use excess capacity at Detroit’s auto factories to make military equipment during the Second World War—to create what came to be called an “arsenal of democracy.”

Elements of the plan were adopted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, turning

Detroit into an unrivalled industrial powerhouse; a single Chrysler plant produced half the country's tanks. "Eighty years later, we find ourselves again as a part of the arsenal of democracy," Fain said. "It's different this time. The enemy is not a foreign power, across an ocean. The enemy is right here among us—it's corporate greed."

Fain, who is fifty-four, was raised in Kokomo, Indiana, a city of sixty thousand. Kokomo has five Stellantis power-train plants, which together employ more than seven thousand people. Fain's mother was a nurse; his father was the town's chief of police. "I was taught by my parents: Don't ever forget where you come from, no matter where you go or what you do," he told me. "We came from destitution."

All four of Fain's grandparents worked at Kokomo auto plants. They had grown up during the Depression, in deep poverty in Tennessee and Kentucky; one grandmother was abandoned with her siblings at an orphanage. Fain's paternal grandfather was hired by Chrysler in

1937, the year it was organized by the U.A.W. “He was so proud of that job,” Fain said. His grandfather saved every one of his pay stubs for the next thirty-five years. “He kept them in a box until the day he died,” Fain continued. “Before he passed, he was asking his grandkids if there was anything we wanted.” Fain asked for the stubs. “Honestly, I didn’t even know why,” he said. “But those have become a treasure to me.”

In 1994, Fain was hired by Chrysler as an electrician. Like many autoworkers, he recalls his first day with a mixture of awe and terror. “They took us out on the shop floor,” he said. “The die-casting plant where I worked was very hot in the summertime—it could reach a hundred thirty degrees.” Overhead cranes carried molten aluminum on a monorail. Sirens went off constantly. “I thought, What the hell did I get myself into?” he told me.

Two years earlier, Fain had voted for Ross Perot over Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush in the Presidential election. “Pretty simple,” Perot said, in a debate that year. “If you’re paying twelve, thirteen dollars, fourteen dollars an hour for factory workers, and you can move your factory south of the border, pay a dollar an hour for labor . . . have no environmental controls, no pollution controls, and no retirement, and you don’t care about anything but making money, there will be a giant sucking sound going south.” “That resonated with me,” Fain said. “He was the only candidate saying that.”

Jennifer Fultz works ten-hour shifts, six or seven days a week, at a Jeep plant in Toledo. "I'm thirty-three, and my body is

Doris Jones (right) has been running the griddles and the food pantry in the Local 12 kitchen. "I'm a twenty-four-hour

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time bomb," she said.

Fain acknowledged the symbolism of Biden's visit to the picket line, the first time a sitting President had done so. "It was a historic moment," he said. "But what's going to matter is how the government drives this transition." I asked whether the U.A.W. would endorse Biden. "Our endorsements are no longer going to be freely given," Fain said. "They're going to be earned." He worries that if electric-vehicle manufacturing becomes another low-wage, low-benefit carve-out, Democrats in the Rust Belt will see a repeat of 2016. "Trump's saying what our members are experiencing," he said.

At the same time, Fain vehemently denounced Trump, drawing a connection between the migrants at the heart of the current border crisis and his own ancestors. "I look at these destitute people that Trump likes to call rapists or thieves or drug dealers," he said. "They are the same as me. They are no different from my family." Despite his fear that workers will be left out of the green transition, he has little patience for Republican politicians, including Trump, who rebuke it as liberal pandering. Fain notes that Reuther, one of his heroes, was an early proponent of environmentalism; it was part of his broad political vision for the union. He lobbied for the Clean Air Act against opposition from the major American auto companies, and wrote the first check for the first Earth Day, in 1970, to which the U.A.W. became the largest contributor. He once asked, "What good is another week's vacation if the lake you used to go to is polluted and you can't swim in it and your kids can't play in it?"

Walter Reuther was born in 1907 in Wheeling, West Virginia. His father, Valentine, a union organizer, drove a horse-drawn beer wagon and ran for state legislature on the Socialist Party ticket. In 1919, when Eugene Debs was in prison in West Virginia, Valentine took Walter to meet him. (Debs was convicted of violating the Espionage Act for opposing America's involvement in the First World War.) Walter became a Socialist, too, dropped out of high school, and started working as an apprentice tool-and-die maker at Wheeling Steel. (A four-hundred-pound die landed on his foot, costing him a toe.) He later moved to Detroit, where wages were better, and got a job at a Ford plant while attending what became Wayne State University. In 1932, Reuther left Ford, claiming that he was forced out because of his political activities. He withdrew a chunk of his savings and went to Europe with his brother Victor. They travelled through ten countries, mostly by bicycle, before ending up in the Soviet Union, where they worked for a year and a half at a new automotive plant. The food was unfamiliar—each brother lost about twenty pounds—but Walter found the atmosphere in the plant's cafeteria “absorbing,” and praised “the wonderful spirit” found among the workers, who sometimes strummed guitars and danced at lunch.

Reuther returned to Detroit in 1935, the year Roosevelt signed the Wagner Act, which guaranteed the right to collectively bargain—and to strike. At the time, conditions in automobile plants were appalling. During a heat wave, hundreds of autoworkers died in plants in Michigan. Autoworkers earned an average of nine hundred dollars a year; the government estimated that a family of four needed nearly

double that, at a minimum, to survive. Meanwhile, General Motors was employing a Ku Klux Klan offshoot called the Black Legion to break up union-organizing efforts.

In 1936, Reuther was elected as a delegate for the U.A.W. He became president of Local 174, where he presided over a dramatic expansion of the union's membership. He participated in the Flint Sit-Down Strike, a violent forty-four-day battle that led to the unionization of G.M. A similar tactic was used to unionize Chrysler. During the Battle of the Overpass, in which U.A.W. organizers were savagely beaten by Henry Ford's private security guards outside an assembly plant in Dearborn, Reuther was kicked in the face and thrown down two flights of stairs. Finally, in 1941, after a ten-day strike, the union succeeded in organizing Ford, too.

During the Second World War, with factories running around the clock, there was a tremendous demand for workers. Hundreds of thousands of them, Black and white, migrated to the city, especially from the South. In June, 1941, Roosevelt issued an executive order

banning discriminatory employment practices in the defense industry, the first Presidential civil-rights order since Reconstruction. White workers, sometimes stoked by management, responded with so-called hate strikes—in 1943, twenty-five thousand walked out from Packard after it promoted three Black people to the aircraft assembly line. R. J. Thomas, the U.A.W. president at the time, suspended thirty of the ringleaders, and, with help from government agencies, brought the rest of the strikers back to work. “We will not retreat,” Thomas said. “If we take any other position, our organization is lost.”

Reuther was elected president of the U.A.W. in 1946. In a speech that year, he argued that the labor movement should not focus solely on economic gains for its members but instead must “fight for the welfare of the public at large.” Two years later, a hit man nearly assassinated him in his kitchen. Afterward, his renown grew; there was speculation that he would run for President of the U.S. His social-democratic vision came to encompass a variety of causes—nuclear disarmament, environmentalism, and, especially, civil rights. When Martin Luther King, Jr., and dozens of other demonstrators were arrested in Birmingham, in 1963, Reuther sent two deputies with a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in cash to bail them out. He was the only prominently featured white speaker at the March on Washington.

In 1970, Reuther died in a plane crash en route to Black Lake, Michigan, where he was building a thousand-acre labor-education retreat. Not long afterward, real wages for non-college-educated workers began to decline. Oil shocks, deregulation, high interest rates, and globalization increasingly shifted industrial jobs first to the non-



union South and then to low-wage foreign countries. By that point, the U.A.W.'s membership had peaked, at one and a half million.

In September, Donald Trump announced that he would travel to Michigan to support striking autoworkers; the event was held at a non-union manufacturer.

The U.A.W. got weaker. Fain traces this downswing in part to the creation of “joint programs”—management-labor partnerships that he believes undermined the union’s independence. Forty years of what Fain calls “company unionism” contributed to a series of bad contracts and laid the foundation for a corruption scandal that broke in 2017, after a federal probe, and led to seventeen convictions, including of two past U.A.W. presidents, in 2021, and three former Chrysler executives. The executives had paid more than three and a half million dollars in bribes to U.A.W. officials, partly through credit cards issued by one of the company’s joint training centers, in Detroit. Union officials also spent more than a million dollars of members’ money on golf, steak dinners, cigars, and booze. Earlier this year, Fain narrowly won the U.A.W. presidency, on a promise to restore the union to its

Reuther-era militancy. (The U.A.W. is still under a court-appointed monitor.)

Today, the union has three hundred and eighty thousand active members; less than half are employed by the Big Three. (In the seventies, the U.A.W. organized administrative staff at Wayne State; more than a quarter of the union's members now work in higher education.) The accumulated troubles have driven Fain to take an aggressive approach to the current negotiations—he needs the deal to be good enough to woo workers in the burgeoning electric-vehicle industry, where many competitors, including Toyota and Tesla, are not unionized. Fain told me that there was little to distinguish non-union jobs from many of the positions that the Big Three were offering. He added, “It’s hard to grow a movement when people can’t see the difference.”

Two weeks into the strike, the kitchen at Local 12 was buzzing. Doris Jones and a few assistants were making a hundred breakfasts to bring to the picket line. Jones, who is fifty-five years old and has long braids, poured gallons of eggs onto a griddle next to piles of turkey sausage. She had been arriving at the hall at six in the morning every day since the strike started and staying until midnight, sometimes later. “I’m a twenty-four-hour time bomb,” she told me. She has worked at the Jeep plant for more than two decades. Shortly before the strike, she’d placed boxes around the plant to collect donations for the union’s food pantry. It was now stacked with diapers, one of the most coveted commodities, and with packaged food,

including rice and instant mashed potatoes, which she gave to any member who came in, along with whatever fresh food—plums, peaches—she could get hold of.

Twenty-four years ago, Jones was in nursing school in Toledo when a counsellor offered her an application for a position at the Chrysler Jeep plant. Two weeks later, she was working in the body shop. “I was using weld guns, connecting stuff like the fenders, hoods, the doors,” she told me. “I was getting burned up—my hair, my body, my clothes—and would go home crying. I said, ‘I’m not going back.’ But as the days went by I knew I had a good job, enough money to take care of my family.”

Since 1998, the U.S. has lost more than seventy thousand plants and five million manufacturing jobs, many of them in the Rust Belt.

Jones, the team leader of the Gladiator right-side-door line, has a maternal relationship to her co-workers, who call her Mama D. She earns about thirty-three dollars an hour, and in six years will be eligible for a pension. Several members of her family have worked at

the plant, too, including one of her three sons, who was a supplemental employee, earning half of what his mother made. He told me, of the strike, “It’s hurting a lot of people who need the money.”

By late September, the number of people coming into the food pantry had increased. Striking plants have gummed up entire supply chains, causing thousands of layoffs in other factories. Those workers do not receive five hundred dollars a week in strike pay from the union, though they can file for unemployment insurance, which, in Ohio, is half a worker’s average weekly wage. One day, as I was leaving the pantry, a middle-aged Black woman wearing tinted glasses walked in. She had been laid off from a Chrysler supplier that shut down because of the strike, and she was still waiting for her first unemployment check. She wrote her name in a ledger, and Jones handed her a bag of food. “I’m very, very thankful,” the woman said quietly, as she slipped out the door.

**M**arcy Kaptur, the Democratic representative for Ohio’s Ninth District, which includes Toledo, describes herself as a “daughter of the U.A.W.” Her mother, who worked at Champion, the spark-plug company, was on the union’s first organizing committee there; her father worked at the Jeep plant for a decade. She believes that this strike is historic. “The conditions have become so untenable in these plants,” she said.

In the early nineties, in the House of Representatives, Kaptur led the

fight against NAFTA, which nonetheless passed, 234–200. It was a bipartisan bill; a hundred and two Democrats and a hundred and thirty-two Republicans supported it. On the night of the vote, Kaptur said, corporate lobbyists were given a Ways and Means Committee room as an improvised headquarters from which to whip up last-minute support. At one point, she saw John Sweeney, who would soon be elected president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., come in through a side door to the Capitol. No one paid attention to him. He held his raincoat over his arm, and walked up the stairs to the gallery, alone.

After NAFTA passed, Kaptur visited the *maquiladoras*, mostly electronics and car-part factories just south of the U.S.-Mexico border. The workers there, who had no independent trade unions, were making as little as a dollar an hour. Many of them, she said, lived in “hard paper shacks, if you could call them that,” and had no fresh water. “I’m for free trade among free people,” she went on. “When people are not free, they become exploited by their own governments.” She blamed NAFTA for other deleterious outcomes, such as allowing American agribusinesses to flood Mexico with cheap corn, wiping out much of the country’s subsistence farming. Studies estimate that some two million Mexican farmers lost their livelihoods as a result. Many of them immigrated to the United States; others stayed behind and replaced corn with opium poppies, for producing heroin.

The over-all national income is higher in the United States with free trade, but the majority of people are worse off. According to research by Josh Bivens, of the Economic Policy Institute, trade with low-wage countries costs American workers without a college degree—roughly

sixty per cent of the population—twenty-three hundred dollars a year in lost wages, even after accounting for the lower prices of consumer goods. Since 1998, the U.S. has lost more than seventy thousand plants and five million manufacturing jobs, many of them in the Rust Belt. Sherry Lee Linkon, who teaches working-class studies at Georgetown University, coined the phrase “the half-life of deindustrialization” to describe how the ripple effects of factory and mill closures can last for generations. Last month, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, economists at Princeton, published new research showing that life expectancy for Americans without a college degree peaked around 2010 and has been falling ever since. By 2021, not having graduated from college meant eight and a half fewer years of life.



Despite Trump's hostility toward labor, he has made criticism of NAFTA, which he calls "the worst trade deal ever made," a centerpiece of his political career.

The current strike was meaningless, Trump said, because "under Biden's mandate the entire car industry will be packed up and shipped to China."

Bill Clinton and Barack Obama each won Ohio twice, but neither arrested the economic decline of the state's working class, which is particularly acute in the traditionally Democratic northern corridor. (During Obama's first Presidential campaign, he called NAFTA "devastating" and "a big mistake"; in office, he pushed for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free-trade deal with eleven countries.) "As deindustrialization occurred, especially in steel-making places like Youngstown, those areas became increasingly redder," John Russo, an

emeritus professor of working-class studies at Youngstown State University, told me. “The reason for that, as much as any other, is the Democrats couldn’t—or wouldn’t—protect those places from what was happening.” In Kaptur’s view, Trump seized on this opening. “He’s like the last brass ring on the merry-go-round,” she said. “He expresses, in his rather demented way, the angst that people feel, the uncertainty that people feel—and he expresses their rage.”

The Democrats, meanwhile, are in thrall to the coasts. (The Party’s House leaders are all from coastal states.) “We have to fight like hell for this part of the country, because we’re ignored,” Kaptur said. She noted that the most recent Amtrak appropriations contained “nothing” for rail in the Midwest and twelve billion dollars for the Northeast Corridor. In 2021, Republicans in the Ohio state legislature redrew her district to include more conservative areas, in a clear attempt to oust her, yet she was reelected, defying expectations. That victory, and those of Senator Sherrod Brown, who has also vigorously opposed free-trade agreements, reflects the salience of the issue. Kaptur is worried about 2024, and beyond. “The Democrats are very fortunate to have many educated people in the Party,” she said. “But, when you start losing the working people of America, you’re in big trouble—and they are.”

A recent New York *Times*/Siena poll showed Biden slipping badly with working-class voters of all races; his lead among nonwhite, non-college-educated voters has fallen to just sixteen points, down from forty-eight in 2020. Meanwhile, the U.A.W. strike has become something of a cause célèbre for aspiring right-wing populists. In

September, the Republican senator Josh Hawley joined a G.M. picket line in Wentzville, Missouri, despite his previous support for a right-to-work bill, which would have weakened the finances and the bargaining power of the state's unions. Soon afterward, the Republican senator J. D. Vance, who had a previous career in venture capital, joined Kaptur on the Jeep picket line. "First time here?" she asked him.

The union's stand-up-strike strategy is paying off. In late September, minutes before a 10 A.M. deadline at which more plants would go offline, Stellantis agreed to reinstate its cost-of-living adjustment. After the U.A.W. threatened to strike at a lucrative General Motors plant that makes Cadillac S.U.V.s, the company committed to placing new battery plants under its master agreement with the union. (Later, that plant went on strike anyway.) "We've been told the E.V. future must be a race to the bottom," Fain, wearing an "Eat the Rich" T-shirt, said in a video announcement. "Now we've called their bluff." By late October, he had expanded the strike to include more than forty-five thousand workers across twenty-two states, and the most profitable facilities for each of the three automakers.

Then came the breakthrough: the tentative agreement with Ford. Fain instructed his members there to get back to work, so that the company could start building and selling cars again as quickly as possible, which would further pressure General Motors and Stellantis to settle.

According to the Anderson Economic Group, the Big Three have lost

more than four billion dollars since the strike began.

The economic pain has also been deepening for the workers still on strike. After speaking to the convoy in Detroit, Fain paid a visit to the Jeep picket line in Toledo. He was received with adulation, but also drew notes of skepticism. “How long do you think before we start struggling?,” one worker, who was holding his young daughter, asked. Another said, “Some of us are struggling already. Like, is that a discussion?” (For most workers, strike pay is less than half a weekly paycheck.) Fain nodded. “It sucks,” he said. “We don’t want to be out here. But at the end of the day the company’s put us in this position. It’s a choice: Do we strike? Or do we continue to go backward?”

For most workers, strike pay is less than half a weekly paycheck. “It sucks,” Fain said. “The company’s put us in this position. It’s a choice: Do we strike? Or do we continue to go backward?”

When Fain left, I drove to Local 12, past a number of vacant, grassy lots, remnants of former factories. Toledo appeared to be in somewhat better shape than other Rust Belt cities where I had spent time—Racine, Youngstown, River Rouge—but the emptiness was unmooring. The United States has destroyed its industrial base more deeply than other Western countries have. Given that both Democrats and Republicans had a hand in the destruction, the political fallout has been unpredictable. Many workers I met seemed to view the upcoming Presidential race with distance and cynicism. They were more animated by the visceral, immediate politics of the strike.

By the time I got back to the hall, it was getting dark. I saw Jones bustling around. It had been another long day; she looked exhausted but also content. Someone had donated trays of fried chicken, and she was going to the picket to deliver them. We walked out to her white Jeep and she opened the back door. The smell was enticing, and she insisted I take a piece. I asked what she had thought of Fain's visit. She answered slowly and deliberately. "He spoke the truth," she said. Anxiety about the strike was rising among the door-line-crew members, but Fain had managed to calm them. "I saw them being a little more at ease, listening to the words he was saying," she said. "He was reassuring them that they're going to be great." She shut the door, waved goodbye, and drove back to the line. ♦

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*An earlier version of this article misstated the boundaries of Ohio's Ninth*

## *Congressional District.*

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