

LABOR

“Is This a Union Town or What?” Chicago's Transformative Role in the Labor Movement—Past and Present—Fuels UAW Rally

Mayor Brandon Johnson and local, national and international labor leaders joined United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain at a rally for striking autoworkers and allies at the Local 551 union hall.

MAIA MCDONALD

OCTOBER 9, 2023



Marcelina Pedraza, a member of UAW Local 551, at a rally for striking autoworkers on Saturday, October 7, 2023.

PAUL GOYETTE

CHICAGO MAYOR BRANDON JOHNSON AND a cast of high-profile labor leaders joined United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain and hundreds of striking autoworkers and supporters for a rally on Chicago's far Southeast Side on Saturday. Chicago's critical role in the labor movement — past and present — the importance of labor solidarity and what the UAW's struggle against the Big Three automakers means for the entire working class, took center stage.

"Is this a union town or what?" Johnson enthusiastically asked the crowd, to cheers. "The city of Chicago, this country, this world doesn't move without workers. Today, we send a very clear message to the rest of the world that the power of the workers will be heard and felt one way or the other. You're gonna listen to us at the negotiating table, on the streets, at the ballot box and we have made it very clear, if you don't hear us, we'll get a contract, but we'll also send someone to the fifth floor who's a part of the labor movement."

The UAW's "Stand-Up Strike" began in mid-September when the union's contract with the Big Three expired. As the union employed its strategy of rolling out surprise strikes at plants across the country almost every week, UAW Local 551 workers at a Ford assembly plant, where about 5,000 are employed, were called to walk off the job at the end of September. It's the oldest continually operating facility for Ford, where they produce the Explorer, police interceptors and the Lincoln Aviator. The rally was held at the Local 551 union hall.

The Ford assembly plant is one of three Chicago-area plants currently striking, including [a General Motors distribution plant in suburban Bolingbrook](#) and a Stellantis plant in nearby Naperville. Spirits were high and the crowd's fervor potent as union leaders from Local 551 and allies from other unions like the Chicago Teachers Union and the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA joined Johnson and Fain with rousing speeches.

At the beginning of the rally, a sea of red-clad autoworkers surged into the union hall, shouting and waving plastic hand clappers as the California-based rock group The BellRays hyped up the crowd. Lead singer Lisa Kekaula sang refrains of "We've got the power!" and "You've got the power!" against guitarist Bob Vennum's raucous playing. Later on, Chicago-based punk rock band Rise Against's Tim McIlrath led the crowd in singing a rendition of the classic labor song by Pete Seeger, "Which Side Are You On?"

Just outside the union hall and even farther down the road on Torrence Avenue, more striking autoworkers could be found with signs and just as much enthusiasm.

Chants of "UAW! UAW!" punctuated the afternoon.



United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain was joined by local, national and international labor leaders (including Chicago Teachers Union President Stacy Davis Gates and Mayor Brandon Johnson) at a rally for striking autoworkers on October 7, 2023.

PAUL GOYETTE

Fain's appearance in Chicago comes amid key wins in the union's continued bargaining with and strike against the Big Three auto manufacturers—Ford, General Motors and Stellantis. Just a day earlier, Fain announced that GM, in a landmark win for the union and the just transition in auto manufacturing, had agreed in writing to place its electric vehicle battery plants under the UAW's master national contract. Labor Notes editor Luis Feliz Leon's groundbreaking investigation for *In These Times*, “Will the Clean Energy Auto Economy Be Built on Factory Floors Riddled With Toxic Chemicals and Safety Hazards?” gives insight into the importance of the win by detailing the harrowing conditions at the Ultium Cells plant in Ohio that is a joint venture between GM and South Korea's LG Energy Solution.

Fain was the last speaker of the day and when he came to the podium, he placed several of the UAW's current demands and the ability for the UAW to strike with the force that it is in the context of Chicago's transformative union movements and in relation to its ingenuity.

“You know, the city of Chicago holds a special place in the labor movement, past and present,” Fain said. He spoke about the Haymarket Affair and how the demand for an eight-hour day, at the time, was considered by many as untenable and unrealistic. Fain and the UAW are currently demanding a 32-hour workweek for autoworkers.

“We cannot ever come to Chicago and talk about labor without looking at the relevance and recognizing the Haymarket martyrs—137 years ago, thousands of workers in this city were on strike just like our UAW members today,” Fain said. “They came under violent attack as so many workers in this country have faced. Several of their leaders made the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives to the cause of labor. We shouldn’t forget what those Haymarket martyrs were fighting for. The eight-hour day. They were fighting for their lives, they were fighting for their time. They were cut down in pursuit of a radical idea, that our lives belong to us, that our time belongs to us. Even working-class people deserve a quality of life that doesn’t revolve around work.”

Fain and the other speakers also focused on the importance of the Chicago Teachers Union—where Johnson was once an organizer—and how they have fueled the labor movement nationally.

“The CTU revived the strike and sparked a movement that spread across this country. By reforming their union and taking on the boss, the CTU inspired educators across the country to mount the biggest strike ever for decades,” Fain said. “And that’s exactly the kind of action and leadership we need. We need to inspire the working class of this country.”

Sara Nelson, the president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, also focused many of her comments on the CTU and evoked the the union’s legendary late president Karen Lewis.

“When Karen Lewis said ‘strike’ and the CTU went on strike and showed the rest of us that we can do it, that we can build communities for our unions, that we can deny the union busters and build up,” Nelson said. “They built so much power that we have the mayor of Chicago from CTU. That’s one hell of a lot of power.”

Nelson and other speakers also framed the UAW’s Stand-Up Strike as a key opportunity for the labor movement, and one that demands solidarity.

“This is our opportunity to show the working class that we have power when we come together. We can set the agenda for the people,” she said. “We can make this country our country.”

Current CTU president Stacy Davis Gates offered one of the most powerful speeches of the day, focusing on, among other things, union power, how the history of the labor rights movement is

embedded in the history of Black people, the importance of gender justice and LGBTQ+ rights, and the necessity of solidarity in today's current climate of increasing fascism.

"It feels good to be powerful, doesn't it? It feels good to tell people what you want, doesn't it? It feels good to take what you need, doesn't it? It feels good to be a member of a labor union. See, this is power. This is the power of solidarity. This is the power and the promise of our American democracy," Davis Gates said. "I challenge you in this moment to fight for your paycheck and the paycheck of your neighbors next door."



United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain with one of his heroes, the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., and UAW Region 4 Director Brandon Campbell (right), UAW Local 551 Chairman Alan "Coby" Millender (center back), and Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA (back left).

PAUL GOYETTE

Other speakers on Saturday included Chris Pena, the UAW Local 551 president; Jason "Waco" Wachowski, the UAW Local 551 vice president; Brandon Campbell, the UAW Region 4 director; Alan "Coby" Millender, the UAW Local 551 chairman; Ka Bong, the chair of the Philippine Kilusang Mayo

Uno union. The Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., whom Fain pointed out as one of his heroes, was also in attendance.

In the crowd, many workers were visibly moved by the words of union leaders and other speakers.

Local autoworker Krista Krudup, who's been working at the Ford Assembly Plant in Chicago for the nearly two years, says she has high hopes for a successful outcome to the strike.

“I've never been in a strike or anything,” Krudup said. “But I'm very hopeful that this will be a turning point, not just for our union as a whole, but for the entire world, that we deserve better pay, better benefits [and] we should be able to feel comfortable ... we should be able to live comfortably.”

Christopher Kruger, a retired UAW Local 890 union leader attended the rally to be in solidarity with the striking autoworkers. He said the rally left him feeling “confident,” and “very enthused.”

Salm Kolis, a local deli worker and member of United Food and Commercial Workers, believes the Stand-Up Strike shows workers of all kinds that they have power and should use it. It's workers that make the country run, Kolis said.

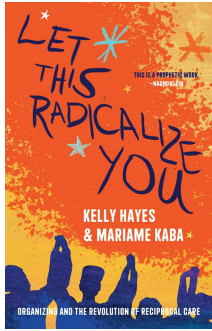
“I think everybody's very pumped up. I've visited a lot of picket lines and workers who are determined to really fight because these issues are really important. They gave up huge concessions in '08 and they're more than entitled to get a hefty raise and to get all the demands that they're fighting for. If they win, it's a win for the entire working class, not just for autoworkers—an example of how union power can be mobilized.”

Fain also described the autoworkers strike as a key turning point for the working class.

“When working-class people stand up, when working-class people fight for economic and social justice, when working-class people go on strike, we can put an end to the race to the bottom. We can stop the struggle [of] living paycheck to paycheck, we can take our lives back,” Fain declared.

“We can take our time back. And we can build an economy that works for the working class and for all of humanity. UAW family, this is our generation's defining moment and it's time for the working class to stand up and stand together.”

For a limited time:



Donate \$20 or more to *In These Times* and we'll send you a copy of *Let This Radicalize You*.

In this new book, longtime organizers and movement educators Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes examine the political lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath, including the convergence of mass protest and mass formations of mutual aid. *Let This Radicalize You* answers the urgent question: **What fuels and sustains activism and organizing when it feels like our worlds are collapsing?**

We've partnered with the publisher, Haymarket Books, and 100% of your donation will go towards supporting *In These Times*.

GET YOUR COPY

MAIA MCDONALD is a Chicago-based freelance journalist who's reported for *Block Club Chicago*, *Borderless Magazine*, *City Bureau*, *The TRiiBE* and other outlets. You can find her on X, formerly known as Twitter, at @maiamcdonald and her website at maiamcdonald.me.

Have thoughts or reactions to this or any other piece that you'd like to share? Send us a note with the Letter to the Editor form.
