

‘Free Trade’ and Trump’s tariffs: A response to Shawn Fain

written by Chris Fry
April 2, 2025



Sean Fain, UAW President.

Elon Musk and his puppet “King Donald Trump” have laid a political trap against the United Auto Workers (UAW) leadership and the U.S. working class as a whole with their escalating tariff war. Now is the time for unionists to call on our leadership to

not be diverted by Trump's tariffs from engaging in global class solidarity and militant struggle. By being immune from Trump's tariffs, Elon Musk hopes to strengthen Tesla company's market position. And all Silicon Valley billionaires seek to replace workers with AI-controlled robots.

In a March 8 [speech](#), UAW President Shawn Fain gave a rousing, militant introduction of reformist Senator Bernie Sanders to a crowd of 10,000 at a high school in the working-class community of Warren, Michigan. Wearing a t-shirt showing "Eat the Rich" at a podium with a sign reading "Fight Oligarchy", Fain's speech and the tremendous response it received from the crowd shows a rising tide of class consciousness among U.S. workers.

Fain opened his talk by describing how autoworkers 40 years ago had incomes and benefits high enough to own a home, raise a family with decent health care, and retire with a pension high enough to live comfortably.

Fain told the crowd that autoworkers in turn had generated billions of dollars in profits for the bosses over the decades.

He then condemned the recent layoffs at both the Stellantis Warren Truck Plant and the General Motors Warren Tech Center of thousands of union workers, a violation of the hard-won contract after a lengthy strike in 2023. Fain blasted Stellantis for laying off union workers at the Truck Plant while shifting the work to Mexico, where workers are paid a paltry \$3 an hour.

Fain did note that he was not attacking those Mexican workers, whom he called "part of our family". Instead, he blamed all this on the greed of the auto company owners and Wall Street bankers. He pointed out that these same companies were bailed out by worker concessions and the taxpayers 15 years ago, only to have them maintain high prices and rob the workers of their jobs.

Fain correctly blamed both political parties for this attack on the working class here and abroad.

He saved his harshest rebuke for Elon Musk, the world's richest man. Fain condemned Musk's attacks on government workers and social services cutbacks. He blasted Musk calling social security a "Ponzi scheme", and said the only such scheme was the billionaires like Musk amassing huge wealth while working people are left behind.

Fain proclaimed: "Billionaires do not have a right to exist!" to thunderous cheers and applause from the crowd.

UAW statements support Trump's tariffs.

Before and after Fain's talk, the UAW released statements supporting Trump's tariffs. The March 4 [statement](#) included:

The UAW is in active negotiations with the Trump Administration about their plans to end the free trade disaster. We look forward to working with the White House to shape the auto tariffs in April to benefit the working class. We want to see serious action that will incentivize companies to change their behavior, reinvest in America, and stop cheating the American worker, the American consumer, and the American taxpayer.

On March 26, after Trump announced a 25 percent tariff on foreign-made vehicles and parts across the board, the UAW released a [statement](#) titled: "In a Victory for Autoworkers, Auto Tariffs Mark the Beginning of the End of NAFTA and the "Free Trade" Disaster."

This afternoon, the Trump administration announced major tariffs on passenger cars and trucks entering the U.S. market, marking the beginning of the end of a

thirty-plus year “free trade” disaster.

“We applaud the Trump administration for stepping up to end the free trade disaster that has devastated working class communities for decades. Ending the race to the bottom in the auto industry starts with fixing our broken trade deals, and the Trump administration has made history with today’s actions,” said UAW President Shawn Fain.

Across a dozen Big Three auto plants that have seen major declines, production has fallen by 2 million units per year in the past decade, while millions of vehicles sold here are made with low-wage, high-exploitation labor abroad.

The statement then lists Big 3 plants across the country that have been shuttered, and then suggests dreamingly the benefits of their being reopened and the workers rehired:

The economic benefits of filling these plants back up with product and good auto jobs would be enormous and have a cascading effect throughout communities from Michigan to Tennessee.

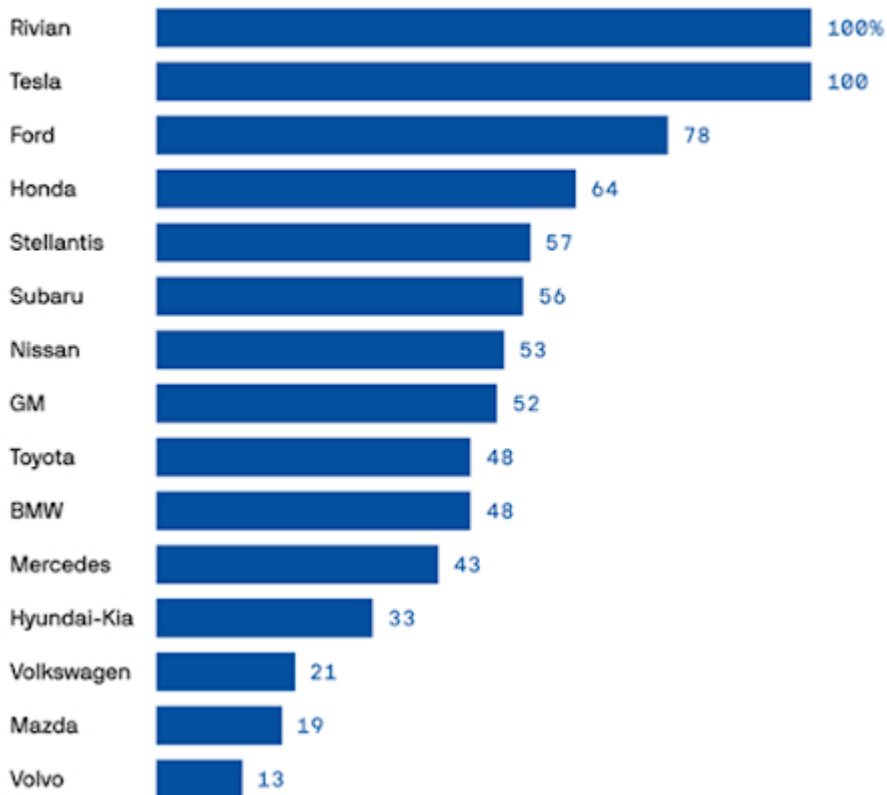
Fain and the UAW leadership are perfectly correct in condemning the so-called “free trade” agreements like NAFTA, which have allowed corporations to close plants here and move our jobs to low-wage states and countries. But the question must be asked: Is that the aim of these Trump tariffs, to reopen plants and rehire the tens of thousands of laid-off auto workers and hire new ones into good-paying jobs? Does that sound like something that Trump and his master, Elon Musk, are aiming for? Is that really going to happen?

Musk’s Tesla wins big.

Trump's tariffs will apply to nearly all automakers, foreign **and** domestic. That's because even the Big 3 have some or most of their parts manufactured abroad, and many of their vehicles are partly or entirely assembled abroad as well. Below is a graph of manufacturers and each of their domestic versus foreign final assembly:

Share of U.S.-sold vehicles assembled in the U.S.

As of Q3 2024



Rivian is a very small EV company. But Musk-owned Tesla is another matter entirely. Notorious for using every [anti-union](#) measure, legal and illegal, to prevent UAW recognition, it would mostly be immune from Trump's tariffs, while its competitors, experts agree, would raise their prices by around \$6,000 per vehicle.

This tariff will give Tesla a big competitive advantage.

Tesla is not just a car company. It is currently manufacturing its [AI-powered Optimus](#) robot which could replace workers in Tesla auto plants:

Given Optimus' ability to deadlift 150 pounds and carry 45 pounds while walking at 5 miles per hour, it makes sense to use the robots in factory settings. In fact, Musk has suggested Optimus robots could address labor shortages, and he even intends to introduce the robot in Tesla factories.

Musk [announced](#) his Optimus production plans on March 21 in his typical fascist style:

"But even 5,000 robots, that's the size of a Roman legion, FYI, which is like a little scary thought. Like a whole legion of robots, I'll be like 'whoa.' But I think we will literally build a legion, at least one legion of robots this year, and then probably 10 legions next year. I think it's kind of a cool unit, you know? Units of legion. So probably 50,000-ish next year," Musk said.

Getting human workers good paying jobs doesn't sound like it's on these billionaires' tariff agenda.

And finally, Trump's tariffs will actually cost the jobs of many autoworkers, as a March 27th [article](#) in the Guardian points out:

Slumping consumer confidence, together with soaring sticker prices, could take a serious bite out of US car sales and cause production to sink. In an unhappy forecast, Jonathan Smoke, chief economist at Cox Automotive, a market research firm, said that as a result of Trump's auto tariffs, US plants would churn out 20,000 fewer cars per week, about a 30% drop compared with before Trump imposed the tariffs. "By mid-April we expect disruption to virtually all North American vehicle production," Smoke said in a Wednesday conference call with

clients and journalists. “Bottom line: lower production, tighter supply and higher prices are around the corner.”

Fain and the UAW leadership are absolutely correct in condemning the billionaire class and their “free trade” agreements like NAFTA, which cost hundreds of thousands of auto worker jobs and hurt the living standards of millions here and abroad. Preparing militant strategies like sit-down strikes and general strikes are perfectly appropriate for this period.

But attaching the union to Musk’s and Trump’s tariff strategy, which is only designed to restore U.S. corporate hegemony and not improve our families’ living standards, is a mistake. UAW President Fain has been perfectly correct in condemning both the Democratic and Republican parties as being devoted to upholding corporate interests. Each party represents only different segments of the billionaire class.

Our class must follow a path devoted only to our interests and willing to “stand up” to these wealthy parasites. We must develop our own strategies, based on class solidarity, not nationalism, to wage that struggle. Unions, like the UAW, can play a pivotal role in the rapidly developing fightback movement against racism, economic attacks and war.

Fry is a UAW retiree and former assembly line worker at the now closed Chrysler Lynch Road Assembly plant.

Source: [Fighting Words](#)

