

Lana Payne Remarks to UAW Collective Bargaining Convention, March 27, 2023

Good afternoon sisters, brothers and friends.

Good afternoon UAW.

It's my pleasure to bring greetings from Canada.

From Unifor.

Your 315,000 trade union comrades in the North.

I bring greetings on behalf of Len Poirier, Unifor's national secretary treasurer. (Here with me) And our entire elected leadership team.

I know I speak for the Unifor crew who have travelled with me when I say it is truly an honour to be in this hall with you today.

Before I get into my remarks, I want to acknowledge newly elected President Fain.

And I want to congratulate Shawn and the entire UAW leadership team, not only for their election... but for committing to serve the diverse membership of this great union.

I also want to give a special shout out to sister Margaret Mock, your newly-elected Secretary-Treasurer – the first African-American woman to hold this office in your union. Congratulations sister.

Representing members, as elected officers, is a great privilege and even greater responsibility.

I've already expressed to Shawn my belief that we are experiencing a special moment across the working class in North America.

And that if we organize enough to seize it, we can profoundly change the future for working people in both our countries.

In his response to me Shawn said he is looking forward to being in this fight together.

I couldn't agree more brother.

And I'd be remiss if I didn't extend my sincerest gratitude to brother Ray Curry.

Someone who I have come to know and who I have great respect for.

Thank you Ray, for all that you've done for working people over many years.

In case any of you were wondering, yes, we do read American news in Canada.

There's a lot of it.

In fact, we just heard the great news that the State of Michigan has become the first in many decades to strike down right to work laws in your country – as they should.

Congratulations to all of you for this hard fought battle.

And, yes, like so many in the international labour movement, we've been following the news of your union, and what's been happening over the past few years.

I'm not sure how much Canadian news finds its way south of the border, but so you know, we've had some stuff happen on our side too.

This is partly why I'm here today, in fact.

Standing before you as the first woman, in Canadian history, to lead an industrial union.

Truly the most profound honour of my life.

We are lucky that we operate in democratic spaces such as these ones.

There are very few of them left in the world we live in.

As we all know, democracy is hard and messy, sometimes.

All of us organize because we believe in a better union.

Everything we do in these halls, whether they be Convention halls or local union halls, matter to our members.

It matters a great deal.

These are halls of legacy.

Halls of struggle.

Halls built by the bloodied and calloused...

And warm and caring hands of working people.

Built by those who came before us. Built with heart and pride and, yes, built with courage.

Our two unions share a deep, and interlinked history, as some of you will know.

A history of triumph, and tension.

It's a unique relationship among unions.

Unlike any other that I know of.

I'm reminded of this shared history every time I visit our Unifor Family Education Centre – formerly the UAW Canada Family Education Centre – in beautiful Port Elgin, Ontario on the shores of Lake Huron.

A centrepiece of this space is a beautiful wood burning fireplace, with a circle of benches surrounding it.

And as Unifor members sit, and keep warm (it's cold in Canada, as you know!), taking a break from a conference, a strategy session, a workshop, or some inspiring union training...

Their eyes are drawn to a large, black and white photo of Walter Reuther, hands in his pockets, standing outside the Ford River Rouge Plant in Dear-Born.

1937.

Reuther and other union reps are staring down a gang of employer thugs.

Within minutes of that photo being taken, those thugs proceeded to kick and punch and beat and bloody our union brothers, before turning to attack the union sisters who were leafletting the plant.

As if violence and intimidation could ever stop a worker's resolve for fairness and respect.

We are all here - every single one of us - because of the courage and the resolve of those who came before us.

The rest, of course, is history.

Ford was unionized.

Autoworkers were empowered.

Workers all throughout North America turned their attention to this union for its leadership, for its fearlessness and for its strength.

My friends, let me tell you something... workers still do.

Workers all across the United States.

On both sides of the border.

Workers look to UAW and they look to Unifor.

I can't tell you how many of our members – young and old – visit our Centre for the first time, stare at that picture, and share strength from that moment.

There are important lessons that we can take from that photo... that historic time.

The union is made of the strongest stuff.

No matter how beaten or bloodied – whether from sticks and clubs in the hands of company goons, or full out political attacks on trade union freedoms or whether it is the hate and the sexism and the racism designed to divide workers – we endure.

We endure for our members and for working people everywhere.

We endure because, if we don't, who will change this world?

Who will bring workers the dignity that each of them deserve?

Who will fight for our fair share of the economic pie , if not us?

My friends, this is our challenge, as trade unionists.

This is our burden. And it's a heavy one.

But it's also our privilege.

Because there is great joy in the struggle.

Every day.

Even in our darkest moments.

Let me reassure you that, today and every day, there truly is no power greater anywhere beneath the sun.

**

As you all know, 2023 is shaping up to be a defining year for the labour movement in North America.

We find ourselves in a moment that is different than in decades past.

Central bankers are waging a class war against working people.

The cost of everything has skyrocketed.

Inflation has hit 40-year highs.

Workers are struggling to keep up.

One thing we know, for certain, is that workers' wages are not causing this problem.

No matter how many times right-wing economists or Federal Bank officials say it, it still doesn't make it true.

What is true, though, is that corporate profits have never been higher.

And yet bankers think the answer to inflation is unemployment.

To throw workers to the wolves.

We do not accept this.

Not today, not ever.

And we will not accept that workers must lose to fight inflation.

And, make no mistake, we will continue to fight back hard against anti-worker attacks no matter where they come from.

Let me also be very clear, workers have every right to demand more and better from their employers.

And they are.

We see it everyday, at every bargaining table, in all the sectors where we represent working people.

And while cost-of-living is a key priority, there are many other challenges workers face.

Friends, the pandemic changed everything. It was workers who got the world through the biggest health crisis in our lifetime.

Health care workers.

Transport workers.

Manufacturing and auto workers.

Education workers.

Warehouse workers.

Grocery store workers.

Workers everywhere kept the economic wheels turning often at risk to their own health and safety.

And most weren't even thanked with a pat on the back.

In the face of that disrespect, workers are fighting back, in glorious fashion.

What's also obvious is most governments in capitalist economies can't seem to think and plan beyond the next fiscal quarter.

A failure to plan forces governments and employers to draw up quick fixes, that never seem to work.

That leave workers, especially women and other marginalized groups behind.

It's why workers need unions so they have a place to build collective power and fight these forces.

**

Just last week I attended an official dinner, welcoming your President, Joe Biden, to Canada. Well me and a few hundred other Canadians.

President Biden not only brought a message of shared opportunity and unity, he brought a message of solidarity.

I don't think the word "union" was mentioned so many times, in such a positive light, in the history of our House of Commons.

It filled me with pride.

And watching right-wing, opposition conservatives squirm in their seats for 30 minutes was pretty great too.

I will say that, from our vantage point, what the US is doing – and the Biden Administration specifically – on economic and industrial policy, is quite impressive.

I've not seen this level of ambition to on-shore critical manufactured goods, invest in domestic value chains and promote clean tech – from any government, in my lifetime.

If this is the economic race the US has started, it's a damn good one.

And it's one that Canada and the U.S., like most things, will win as running mates.

A race that will be won by securing good jobs, with collective agreements, for all.

A race that will be defined by its worker-centred policies.

Our members were incredibly relieved to see that the Inflation Reduction Act set a special carve-in for Canada, on EV consumer rebates.

We were equally disappointed that a UAW proposal to require union labour as part of those rebates was scrapped.

But, if all goes to plan – and we continue to see major investments by both American and Canadian governments, the auto industry of the future – batteries and all – will be built on these North American shores.

And, friends, let me remind you that much of that is our collective doing.

When others said there was no future in factories – we ALL pushed back.

We occupied workplaces.

We set up picket lines.

We ran campaigns.

When General Motors informed us at Unifor, in 2018, that they would close our Oshawa Assembly Plant, the response from our union was fierce.

And it felt as if the entire Canadian population rallied behind our members.

Canadians recognize the critical importance of building things – and building where you sell.

Today, my friends, that plant is back up and running.

Building trucks.

Around the clock.

It's rejuvenated an entire community and region.

And, what's most inspiring, is that half of the workers in that plant are sisters.

And I couldn't be prouder of that.

We told the world we'd win that fight, and we did.

Even when politicians warned us that “the ship had sailed”, we didn't flinch.

As my friend, and former Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove reminds me every time we speak, fighting back, Lana, always make a difference.

Indeed friends, remember WHEN WE FIGHT, WHEN WE ORGANIZE, WE WIN.

**

And we have a fight on our hands right now.

The challenge is immense.

As countries around the world chart their path toward net zero, we better be prepared.

We need to plan.

We need to plan, responsibly, so that industries don't collapse.

We need to plan so that not a single worker is left behind. NOT A SINGLE WORKER IS LEFT BEHIND.

Industrial strategy takes money.

It takes vision. One that is put forward by workers in that industry.

And it requires government to play a leading role.

It also has to start somewhere.

And it has started in the auto industry.

The shift to EVs is historic. As monumental a change as there's ever been in the history of car-making.

And there is a lot to be excited about.

EV investments over the past two-and-a-half years have given many Unifor assembly plants in Canada new life.

New hope.

These investments are spurring others along the supply chain.

Politicians are lining up to tour our facilities.

EVs are the secret sauce, it seems.

But it's not all good news, all the time. And everyone best understand that.

Workers in the supply base will be affected.

We've already seen it.

And we will see more of it.

I can't stress this enough: How the auto sector transition is managed will be the litmus test for transitions in other places.

The whole world is watching.

We have to get this right.

We have to get the policy right. We have to get the bargaining right.

Or this doesn't work.

In 2022, Unifor released our new auto sector strategy called Navigating the Road Ahead.

It's a vision about how we manage this transition in a way that makes sense for working people.

How we ensure job opportunities for autoworkers.

How we tailor social and income supports.

How we expand our collective bargaining rights and grow good, union jobs all along the way.

This is the level of ambition governments need to have.

These are the assurances autoworkers need.

These are the assurances all workers need.

Because, my friends, workers are not going backwards.

This transition will not have workers going backwards.

Because TOGETHER we are going to fight like hell to make sure they don't.

**

And that leads me to this year.

A very important, very historic, bargaining year.

The first time, since 1999, our two unions get to the bargaining table with automakers at the exact same time.

(Not counting of course, the 2009 financial crisis).

This timing creates an opportunity for autoworkers on both sides of the border.

And I look forward to discussions with the new UAW leadership team as we move forward into this very important bargaining time.

We've got a lot of issues to discuss, and a lot of ground to cover.

We'll be talking about wages and the cost of living.

We'll be talking about pensions, whether the companies want to or not.

We'll be talking about job quality and income security and health and safety including mental health and seeking clarity on future product plans.

And we'll be talking about investments, wherever possible.

I know these are top-of-mind issues for UAW members too.

They are top-of-mind issues for workers, everywhere.

And that's why conventions like this are so very important.

It's important that unions like UAW, like Unifor, create these spaces to engage all of the union.

The UAW is a vibrant and diverse union, with members working in many sectors of the economy.

Unifor, too, has grown to represent workers in more than 20 distinct sectors.

From energy to education;

Retail to railways;

Health care to hospitality;

Transit to trucking;

Mining to media.

Just last week, Unifor launched a process to revise our own national collective bargaining program.

We are encouraging members to participate directly and to share their stories, present their best ideas, so we can develop a program that is responsive and reflective.

Then we're going to do what you are doing.

Host a summit to discuss, debate and endorse that program.

A program that will carry us forward over the coming years.

**

My friends, we have a moment here to develop our unions and our bargaining strategies in a way that is both big and bold.

Our unions are more than our presidents.

They are more than our head offices.

Our unions are about all of you making your workplaces better and stronger. All of you building your local unions in communities across the United States.

Bargaining contracts is more than just give and take.

It's transformative.

It's social.

It's about using our union power to raise expectations about what is a good life – here and everywhere.

It's about inspiring others to step up.

To demand fairness.

To take our share of the wealth we create.

Our unions are about building worker power. They have ALWAYS been about building worker power.

And so, from the bottom of my heart, I wish you all a wonderful Convention.

In the months and years and decades to come, we will do great things together. Of that I have no doubt.

We will do great things.

We will do good for our members.

We will continue to change this world.

And when future generations reflect back on this time – let the record show that our two great unions stood together, shoulder-to-shoulder, in solidarity.

