

# Lessons From the UAW Contract Struggle and Victory at DTNA

By  
**BEN SMITH**

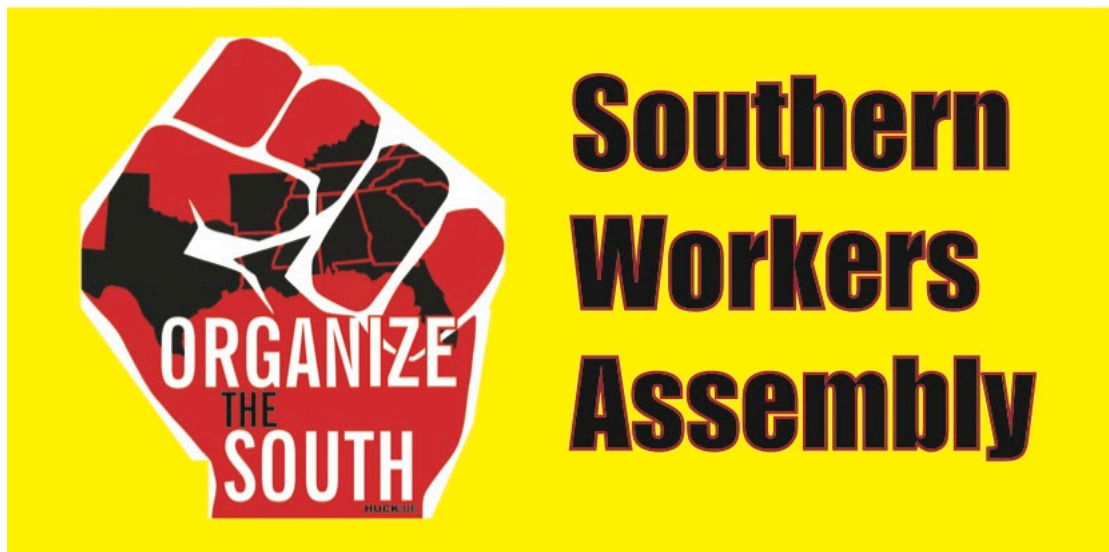


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# Lessons From the UAW Contract Struggle and Victory at DTNA

by **BEN SMITH**

On the evening of Saturday, May 4, just before 9 p.m., thousands of UAW workers employed at plants owned by Daimler Truck North America received text messages to their phones announcing the successful ratification of a new four-year master agreement with the company. The more than 7,300 workers at DTNA's four big heavy truck and bus factories in North Carolina and two DTNA parts distribution centers, one in Memphis and one outside of Atlanta, voted by a margin of 94.5 percent to approve the new contract.

This marks the victorious conclusion of a long, arduous struggle for the UAW at DTNA. While we did not win complete victories on all of our demands, the new contract represents a major step forward for DTNA workers, who have experienced declining living standards and years of setbacks and concessions in previous contracts. The hard times faced by DTNA workers come despite the tremendous profitability of Daimler Truck, DTNA's parent company, the world's largest commercial vehicle manufacturer. Last year alone, Daimler Truck generated record profits of nearly \$6 billion. After years of watching Daimler's profits skyrocket while our wages stagnated, DTNA workers stood our ground this year and forced the company to agree to a contract with a number of significant gains for workers.

In the new four-year deal, workers won, among other advancements, a minimum 25 percent increase in wages over four years. Meanwhile, our union defeated efforts by the company to increase workers' healthcare costs. The union also forced the company to provide a cost of living adjustment provision in our contract so that our wages will rise with the rate of inflation. (The COLA formula in the DTNA agreement is the same as the formula won last fall by UAW workers at the Big 3 auto manufacturers.) In addition to this, for the first time ever, UAW workers at DTNA will receive profit-sharing checks starting

in 2025. Finally, against the steadfast opposition of the company, UAW workers at DTNA won an abolition of two-tier wages and an equalization of wage scales for workers across all of DTNA's UAW-organized plants. In the past, the company has pit workers at DTNA's North Carolina plants against one another and paid workers different pay scales at each facility. Workers at the company's Thomas Built Buses plant in High Point — the largest school bus manufacturing site in North America, where I work — have historically made substantially lower wages than their brothers and sisters at the company's heavy truck plants. This issue has been a matter of extreme frustration for Thomas workers and a source of division for UAW workers across DTNA in general. Under the new contract, the union won a “common wage grid,” and workers at Thomas Built Buses will achieve pay parity with our counterparts at all of the other plants by the end of the contract in 2028. Not only will this mean a better life for workers at Thomas Built Buses, but the end of two-tier wages will increase the strength and solidarity of the UAW at DTNA.

There are some partial shortcomings to the settlement. During the mass rally for DTNA workers that took place on Saturday, April 27 at the UAW Local 3520 hall in Statesville, UAW International president Shawn Fain stated that workers at Thomas Built Buses would immediately be raised to pay parity with workers at the highest-paid truck plant. All workers, including the Thomas workers, would then receive a 10 percent raise on top of the top-tier pay rate. As it turns out, however, this was a misstatement. As already noted, the equalization of wages for Thomas workers will be phased in over the duration of the four-year contract. Beyond this, just as at the Big 3 last fall, the UAW did not win back retiree health care for lower seniority workers at DTNA. Currently, there is a two-tier system for retiree health care, where employees that started before April 9, 2010 receive this benefit, while those hired on or after this date do not. Since workers at the Big 3 also failed to defeat the two-tier system for retiree health care in their contracts during last year's strike, it would have been very difficult for us to win this demand at DTNA. In addition to this, workers have discussed the need to win even higher build rates (minimum production levels to ensure job security and prevent the company from shifting production on a whim) at the Mount Holly and Cleveland plants. The need for higher wage increases across the board has been debated, as well.

Despite this, it's clear that the new contract is a resounding victory for workers. It is, nonetheless, worth considering whether it would have been possible or worthwhile for DTNA workers to go on strike to win more. What would have happened if we had struck? How would a stoppage by the six UAW at DTNA locals impacted the company's entire North American production network? How hard would the company have fought us? Would they have attempted to bring in scabs and pressured workers to cross the picket line? How well organized and strong would our picket lines have been? How long would we have been on strike? What more could we have achieved in terms of building our solidarity as a union and providing an example of workers' power to workers throughout North Carolina? I don't have the answers to these questions, but it's worth pondering them — particularly considering the fact that a strike at DTNA will once again become a live question when we enter into contract negotiations next time around in 2028.

***“There are a number of key lessons that workers should draw from the experience of our contract fight. These lessons can inform our strategy for organizing and building our union going forward.”***

Regardless of this, it's clear that our union is now stronger and more unified than it quite possibly has ever been as a result of our contract struggle. If we continue to build on the advancements we've already made and further strengthen our locals at DTNA, then we will be in a good position heading into the next round of contract negotiations in 2028. In order to help make good on this potential, however, there are a number of key lessons that workers should draw from the experience of our contract fight. These lessons can inform our strategy for organizing and building our union going forward.

What follows are three of these key lessons.

## **Lesson No. 1:**

### **The victory at DTNA resulted from our power as workers**

The first core lesson to draw from our experience is that the only reason why we were able to win major gains in this contract is as a direct result of our solidarity and strike readiness prior to the expiration of our previous contract. The company gave us nothing for free. The reason why we won what we did is because the bosses were afraid that we were going to go on strike. As a result of this, at the eleventh hour on the night of April 26, just before our strike deadline, the company changed course and conceded to our core demands. To put this another way, the decisive force in our victory was *workers' power*.

***“The only reason why we were able to win major gains in this contract is as a direct result of our solidarity and strike readiness prior to the expiration of our previous contract. The company gave us nothing for free.”***

This dynamic can be seen in the course of bargaining during contract negotiations. On April 24 and again on April 25, the company flooded our plants with flyers advertising their bargaining proposals to our union. The company seems to have intended these flyers to convince workers that we were already being offered a good deal and that our union was being *unreasonable*. As detailed in the company's April 25 flyer, released just one day before the expiration of our contract, the company was at this time still pushing for increased healthcare costs for

workers to begin in 2028. In terms of wages, the company was proposing a pay increase of just 22.7 percent over *five* years (as opposed to a 25 percent increase over *four* years, as we ended up winning). Moreover, the company was then still refusing to provide pay parity for workers at Thomas Built Buses. As a result of the company's subpar proposals to our union, tensions at the bargaining table were high throughout April 25. Late that evening, our UAW bargainers walked out of negotiations in response to the company's failure to meet a union deadline to provide a full contract offer by 11 p.m.

The stalemate at the bargaining table persisted for much of the following day. The situation only changed at around 8:30 p.m. when the company shifted course and began to capitulate to union demands. This was just an hour and a half before UAW International president Shawn Fain was scheduled to take part in a widely-advertised Facebook Live event to provide rank-and-file workers with a “Major Announcement on Daimler Truck.” If the bosses failed to meet our union's demands, then Fain — who was at the bargaining table at that time with our Daimler Truck Bargaining Council in Charlotte — would have gone on Facebook Live and called all 7,300 of us out on strike. In order to prevent this from





*Members of UAW Local 5285 take part in a practice picket at DTNA’s Mount Holly Truck Manufacturing Plant on April 15. UAW workers held practice pickets at the company’s plants across North Carolina on the week of April 14 and again on April 23.*

happening, the company’s bargainers caved to our core demands during the two-hour period between 8:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. As it turned out, Fain ended up joining the Facebook Live broadcast almost an hour late. Instead of announcing a strike, he announced that the company and the union had arrived at a tentative agreement.

Why did the company take the threat by Fain to call us out on strike seriously? The reason for this is simple. In the weeks preceding the April 26 expiration, workers had provided ample evidence to the bosses that we were fully prepared to walk out if necessary. Workers made T-shirts announcing our intention to “Strike If Provoked.” At Thomas Built Buses, workers wore shirts that proclaimed “TICK TOCK M\*\*HA FU\*ER!!” — a reference to a line delivered by Shawn Fain at the mass rally on April 2 at the Statesville union hall of UAW Local 3520. Workers made similar shirts at the other plants, as well. Meanwhile, numerous machine operators and tow motor drivers across DTNA posted cardboard signs at their workstations and on their forklifts proclaiming their strike readiness. Hundreds of workers at each plant across North Carolina wore red shirts every Wednesday to show their union pride and let the company know that we meant business. Workers also turned out in the hundreds for raucous practice strike events held at all of the plants on the week of April 14 and again on April 23. Union workers across the plants also signed up their non-union coworkers in droves in preparation for the contract expiration and potential

strike. On April 26, UAW Local 5287 at Thomas Built Buses announced on Facebook that, as a result of a wave of new members signing up to join our union, we had achieved a membership rate of 92 percent — a record membership density previously unattained in our union’s entire 19-year existence.

The ongoing contract campaign at DTNA produced a frenzied level of excitement in the plants. The solidarity and strike readiness became a palpable feeling for workers up and down the line. We were ready to strike — and our supervisors and the company knew it. This is a point that’s worth lingering on. The fact that the company was afraid of a strike on the night of April 26 was not the product of the savvy bargaining skills of the members of our bargaining team — although our UAW leaders certainly did their job at the bargaining table. Rather, *the self activity and strike readiness of the rank-and-file membership is what, ultimately, forced the company’s hand.*

This reality reflects a point that Shawn Fain made in his April 2 speech at the mass rally that launched our contract campaign at DTNA. In his speech, Fain noted that, “If we want to fight and we want to win like never before, we need to energize, inform, and organize our members like never before. Bargaining isn’t a one-person show. Those days are gone. And gone with them is the false belief that union contracts are won just solely by one person or the bargaining team. They’re not. They’re won by the members. These contract fights are won by all of us organizing together collectively around the issues that unite us — demanding what we are owed. They’re won by a united working class that’s ready to shut shit down if we have to!”

Now that we’ve resolved this contract struggle, this focus on membership empowerment is still relevant. A strong union is a union that involves large numbers of rank-and-file members in its daily affairs. The best way to build up our unions, prepare for our next contract expiration in 2028, and contribute to the development of the labor movement in this area is to open our locals to the mass involvement of the rank and file and continue to “energize, inform, and organize our members like never before.”

## **Lesson No. 2:**

### **Our struggle is widely supported by other workers and unions**

One exciting aspect of our contract struggle at DTNA was the widespread solidarity we received from other unions and community groups and from unorganized workers in general. In the run-up to our April 26 strike deadline, numerous unions declared their support for our contract fight. This support included pledges of solidarity from other UAW locals that represent workers at plants in the supply chain for DTNA’s North Carolina plants. What’s more, the leadership of the Teamsters union — including the union’s top International leadership, as well as the leadership of Teamsters Local 391, which represents thousands of UPS workers throughout North Carolina — committed to ensuring that their members would not cross our UAW picket lines at DTNA in the case of a strike.

Our fight at DTNA also generated great interest among fellow workers throughout this region, including non-union workers, who comprise the vast majority of the workforce in North Carolina and the South as a whole. The DTNA plants in North Carolina are some of the largest employers of blue-collar workers in the areas surrounding each plant. Many or most working people in these areas have friends,

family members, and loved ones that work at DTNA. Our righteous fight was thus closely followed by working people throughout North Carolina — and many workers will, no doubt, draw important conclusions about union power and organization that can be applied to their own workplaces.

What is clear is that our struggle for justice and a better life at DTNA widely resonated with the broader working class. And organized workers in particular were willing to show up, speak out, and support our fight.

Prior to the start of bargaining, a coalition of several workers' organizations came together to provide support to the contract struggle at DTNA. This coalition included the Southern Workers Assembly, a network of rank-and-file worker activists from local unions, other workers' groups, and organizing committees at non-union workplaces. The SWA is backed by several strong unions in the South, including National Nurses United; UE Local 150, which represents public-sector workers in North Carolina; and ILA Local 1422, the powerful union of dockworkers in Charleston, South Carolina. In addition to the SWA, the coalition that came together in support of our fight at DTNA included the group Jobs with Justice and the organization Truckers Movement for Justice/Tamexun, which organizes independent owner-operator truckers and trucking company employees in both the United States and Mexico.

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This coalition worked with the International UAW and our UAW locals at DTNA to coordinate flyer brigades at DTNA plants across the Carolinas in February. The coalition also helped to organize the April 23 global day of solidarity in support of our fight at DTNA. Among the actions that took place on this date was a demonstration in support of the UAW at the Portland, Oregon headquarters of DTNA — an action that was organized by the Oregon AFL-CIO and attended by members of the International Association of Machinists

that work at the company's Portland truck plant. A leafletting action also took place on this date at DTNA's non-union Freightliner Custom Chassis plant in Gaffney, South Carolina. The leafletting action in Gaffney drew strong interest from large numbers of workers at what is DTNA's only non-union production facility in the United States. Additionally, the day of solidarity included a demonstration by Brazilian workers from the union CNM/CUT at Daimler's massive plant in São Bernardo do Campo, Brazil, which employs more than 12,000 workers. Another action backed by Tamexun was held in proximity to the company's plant in Saltillo, Coahuila State, Mexico.

Meanwhile, in the run up to our contract expiration on April 26, a slew of unions released powerful solidarity statements pledging their backing for our fight at DTNA. Both the SWA and UE Local 150 put out hard-hitting statements in April in support of our struggle. And on April 10, the president and vice-president of the North Carolina Association of Educators, the union for public school teachers and other school workers, published an op-ed that draws parallels between our UAW fight for justice at DTNA and the struggle by public school workers in North Carolina for stronger public schools, better learning and teaching conditions, and living wages for educators and all school workers. In North Carolina, school





*Three members of UAW Local 5287 attended the April monthly meeting of the Guilford County Association of Educators, the NCAE affiliate for teachers and other employees at Guilford County Schools. GCAE members were inspired by our UAW struggle at DTNA and pledged to support us in the case of a strike.*

workers and all other state employees are prevented from engaging in collective bargaining with their employers as a result of a Jim Crow-era state law on the books. Despite this, in recent years, NCAE members have fought tooth and nail to strengthen their union, build power, and stop efforts by reactionary politicians and their benefactors to undermine and underfund public schools. In 2018, tens of thousands of public-school teachers in North Carolina staged a one-day strike in school districts across the state and held a mass protest at the North Carolina State Capitol in Raleigh as part of the broader strike wave by education workers that took place across the country between 2018 and 2019.

The bonds of solidarity between the UAW and the NCAE were further strengthened when, on April 11, a group of three members of UAW Local 5287 from the Thomas Built Buses plant in High Point attended the monthly union meeting of the Guilford County Association of Educators, the NCAE affiliate for teachers and other school workers employed by Guilford County Schools. Members of GCAE teach the children of the members of Local 5287 at schools in High Point and throughout Guilford County,



where Thomas Built Buses is located. During the meeting, the teachers were inspired to hear about our fight for justice at DTNA, and they further pledged their support for our struggle in the case of a strike.

Finally, during the contract struggle, our union built a relationship of solidarity with union workers at the Blue Bird school bus manufacturing plant in Fort Valley, Georgia, who are organized through the United Steelworkers union. This is important as Thomas Built Buses and Blue Bird are the two largest school bus manufacturers in North America. On April 24, the USW bargaining committee at Blue Bird sent a signed statement pledging their support for UAW Local 5287. The statement declares, in part, “We completely understand what you all have to deal with every day while producing the buses that carry some of this nation’s most precious cargo to and from school. If there is any way that we can assist you please feel free to reach out to us. An injustice to one is an injustice to all.” The USW bargaining committee also sent a solidarity video as a further expression of their support for our struggle.



*After receiving a solidarity statement from the United Steelworkers bargaining committee at the Blue Bird school bus manufacturing plant in Fort Valley, Georgia, strike captains and other members of UAW Local 5287 posed for a photograph in front of our union hall in Archdale, North Carolina to reciprocate the support. Our sign reads, “SOLIDARITY with USW at Blue Bird! UAW Local 5287.”*

Currently, USW workers at Blue Bird are locked in a protracted fight of their own for a first contract with their employer. Last year, in a triumphant victory for the labor movement, the 1,500 workers at Blue Bird voted in a labor board election to unionize their plant and join the United Steelworkers. As noted by the USW, this was “the largest union organizing win at a manufacturing plant in the region in 15 years.”

Members of UAW Local 5287 received the statement of support from the Blue Bird workers while dozens and dozens of union members, including designated strike captains, were gathered at the Local 5287 union hall in Archdale to sign up for strike duty in preparation for the April 26 contract expiration. At that time, a strike seemed very likely to take place. After receiving the solidarity statement, strike captains and other members of Local 5287 posed for a group photograph with a sign that reads, “SOLIDARITY with USW at Blue Bird! UAW Local 5287.” The solidarity statement from the USW bargaining committee at Blue Bird and the solidarity photograph from UAW Local 5287 were later shared on social media by the UAW International. Following the announcement of the tentative agreement between the UAW and DTNA, the USW bargaining committee at Blue Bird was then provided with the tentative agreement contract summary and white book for UAW Local 5287 so the USW can use this information to aid their ongoing negotiations and fight for a better deal from the company.

This is just a sampling of the solidarity shown by segments of the labor movement with the UAW during our contract struggle at DTNA. In addition, other support was provided by the North Carolina State AFL-CIO, as well as members of various local unions that attended our two mass rally events at the Local 3520 hall in Statesville.

All in all, the solidarity coming from other unions, workers’ organizations, and community members greatly aided our fight at DTNA. This support gave confidence to UAW workers across DTNA and struck fear in the hearts of the bosses and their political representatives, as well. All this speaks to the fact that solidarity across organized labor and the broader working class is an *absolutely essential component* to building an effective working-class movement.

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With this lesson in mind, going forward, our UAW at DTNA locals should further cultivate relationships with groups of organized workers in our area, including those that stood in solidarity with us during our time of need. It is in our interest to help build up and strengthen the labor movement in North Carolina. We can also assist in organizing the unorganized — an initiative that has the potential to dovetail with the UAW’s campaign to organize the Southern auto and EV battery industry. Progress in these areas will bolster our ability to wage effective contract campaigns in 2028 and beyond.

On a more specific level, there is a need for the UAW to expand the strength and reach of our UAW Daimler Truck Bargaining Council in preparation for the expiration of our contract in 2028. The UAW has the ability to bring the vast majority of DTNA’s production facilities under our umbrella. In order to do this, we must build solidarity with UAW Local 163, which represents some 1,300 workers at the DTNA-owned Detroit Diesel plant in Detroit, Michigan. The contract at that plant expires in April 2028, so it’s very much a possibility that we can bargain alongside these workers — and strike with them if need be — next time around. UAW Local 163 should be a part of our Daimler bargaining council going forward.

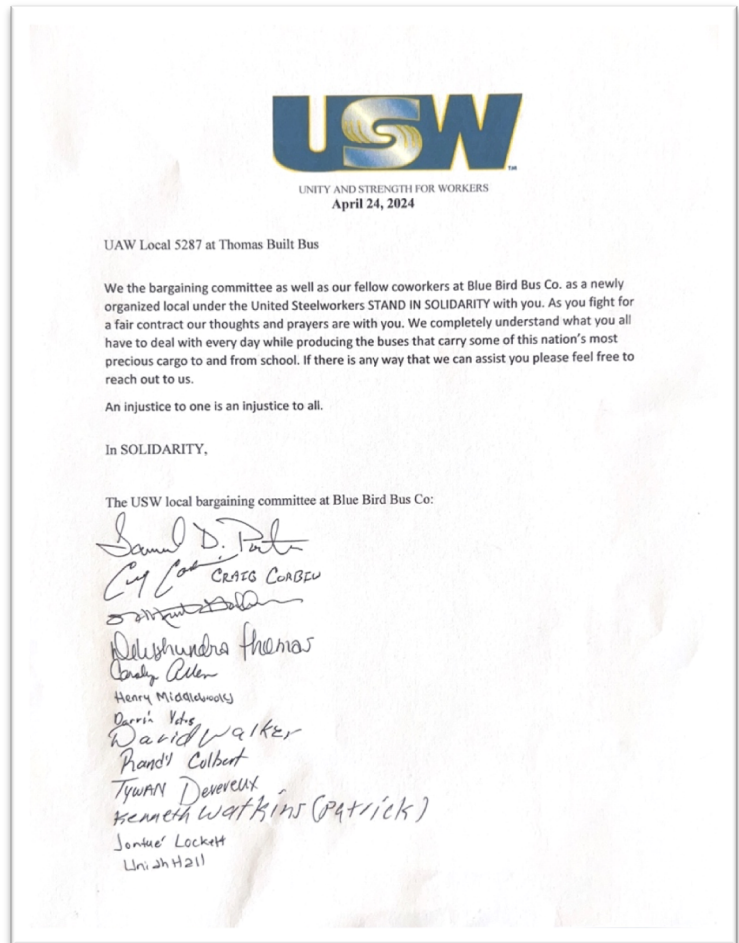
Secondly, the UAW can bolster our relationship with the unions at DTNA's truck plant in Portland, where workers are members of the IAM and a consortium of other craft unions.

Beyond this, a key goal of the UAW must be to organize DTNA's non-union chassis plant in Gaffney and help bring the workers at this facility on board to our UAW at DTNA team. Workers at the Gaffney plant will greatly benefit from a union, and we will be stronger collectively when they are finally a part of our bargaining council. The UAW must also organize the new EV battery plant that Daimler Truck is building as a joint venture with the companies Paccar and Cummins in Marshall County, Mississippi. This plant, which will cost \$1.9 billion and employ some 2,000 workers, is scheduled to begin producing batteries in 2027.

Finally, UAW workers must build solidarity with our Mexican brothers and sisters at DTNA's plants in Saltillo and Santiago Tianguistenco and assist these workers either in forming an independent union that is closely aligned with the UAW — or else organizing directly into the UAW itself. When workers in Mexico go on strike we should be prepared to strike with them — and vice versa. While the company tries to pit us against Mexican workers, the truth of the matter is that workers at the Mexican plants are our brothers and sisters, and our interests are tied together. Crucially, the UAW International now supports a policy of providing solidarity and support to our fellow workers in Mexico and is actively campaigning to build the independent union movement there.

If we accomplish these aims in the next four years then we will be an unstoppable force at DTNA.

Beyond this, it should be added that, going forward, a goal of UAW Local 5287 must be to further bolster our ties with the USW workers at Blue Bird and, in addition, build solidarity with workers throughout the school bus manufacturing sector. This includes building solidarity with UAW Local 5010 at the IC (Navistar) school bus plant in Tulsa, Oklahoma. IC is the third largest school bus manufacturer in North America, behind Thomas Built Buses and Blue Bird. The UAW should also seek to organize the



*On the eve of a looming potential strike at DTNA, members of the USW bargaining committee at Blue Bird sent Local 5287 a solidarity statement declaring, "We completely understand what you all have to deal with every day while producing the buses that carry some of this nation's most precious cargo to and from school. If there is any way that we can assist you please feel free to reach out to us."*

unorganized at two recently-opened school bus manufacturing plants owned by startup companies — the Lion Electric plant in Joliet, Illinois and the GreenPower plant in South Charleston, West Virginia. (Notably, an unsuccessful union drive already took place late last year at the Lion Electric plant in Joliet, which started limited mass production earlier in 2023.) It is in the interest of all workers in the school bus manufacturing sector to standardize wages across the industry and prevent our employers from pitting us against each other in a race to the bottom. Workers at the Big 3 auto manufacturing companies — Ford, Stellantis, and GM — bargain together in solidarity as fellow members of the UAW. We should strive to attain similar levels of unity in the school bus manufacturing sector.

As a final point here, it's worth adding that the expiration of our new contract at DTNA in March 2028 nearly aligns with the contract expiration for the 150,000 UAW workers employed by the Big 3 auto manufacturers. The contract at the Big 3 expires on International Workers Day — May 1, 2028. With this in mind, it should be possible for us at DTNA to obtain contract extensions in 2028 until May Day so we can act (and strike, if necessary) in tandem with our union brothers and sisters in the auto industry, as well as our fellow UAW workers at Detroit Diesel. Crucially, UAW International president Shawn Fain is also calling for unions across the country to align their contracts to expire on May 1, 2028 with the goal of waging a powerful working class fight, and possibly a general strike, to win broader economic and political demands, including universal health care, pensions for all, and shorter hours and higher pay for all workers. The day chosen for this struggle, May Day or International Workers Day, is not a coincidence. International Workers Day was born out of the epic struggle for an eight-hour workday in the United States in the 1880s — and to this day it remains a celebrated holiday in honor of the labor movement in almost every country across the world, not including the United States and Canada, of course.

Given the expiration of our contract at DTNA in March 2028, we will be able to take part in this monumental struggle to come.

### **Lesson No. 3:**

## **Our UAW struggle is a part of a broader working-class movement**

A final lesson to take away from our UAW fight at DTNA is the fact that our struggle is part of a longstanding, historical movement of working-class people to build a better world for our class.

The UAW has a proud history of struggle at DTNA in North Carolina. The fact that DTNA's plants in North Carolina are unionized in the first place is not the product of a friendly arrangement between the company and the union. Rather, as Steven J. Silvia recounts in his 2023 book *The UAW's Southern Gamble*, the UAW gained a toehold at DTNA in the Carolinas through waging an intense battle and a strike in direct opposition to the company, who had hoped to keep the union out of its Carolina plants. Workers at the Freightliner plant in Mount Holly built their union, UAW Local 5285, through waging a victorious 17-day strike for a first contract in December 1991. The strike victory and organization of Local 5285 made it possible to expand the union's presence and organize and win our locals at the three other North Carolina DTNA plants in the early and mid 2000s.



The historical memory of the 1991 strike at Freightliner in Mount Holly was a factor in our contract struggle. Shawn Fain provided a powerful summary of the '91 strike in his April 2 speech at the Local 3520 hall. And during the mass rally and celebration on April 27, also held at the Local 3520 hall, Ricky McDowell, president of Local 5285, himself a veteran of the '91 stoppage, called a group of fellow 17-day strikers up to the stage to commemorate the strike that built our union at DTNA.

In addition to the 1991 strike, our struggle at DTNA harkens back to a long, heroic history of struggle by workers in North Carolina. This tradition includes, among other notable moments, the *mass strike* that took place in 1932 in High Point when thousands of industrial workers walked off the job at hosiery mills,

furniture factories, and other workplaces to protest starvation-level pay by factory bosses and demand better wages and conditions. As recounted in the 1987 article by historian John G. Selby, “Better to Starve in the Shade than in the Factory,” the mass strike in High Point was started and led by workers in the city’s numerous hosiery plants. At its height, the movement involved some 15,000 workers on strike. Our movement also includes the epic 1934 general textile strike, when some 400,000 workers across New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, and the South, including tens of thousands of workers in North Carolina, went on strike for 22 days in what is one of the largest strikes to ever take place in U.S. history.

The history of North Carolina’s labor movement is also linked closely to the Civil Rights movement and the broader Black Freedom struggle. The Triad area in particular is a key area of importance for the Civil Rights movement. It was in Greensboro where four Black students from North Carolina A&T State University sat down at the Woolworth department store lunch counter in 1960 to protest against racial segregation in public accommodations. This kickstarted a national movement of sit-ins at lunch counters and other public places in opposition to segregation. The movement helped to bring about the collapse of Jim Crow — the system of legal segregation in the South that had been designed and enforced by the ruling class and their agents since the late nineteenth century with the goal of keeping Black people down and dividing Black and white workers in order to prevent working people in general from building power and fighting for a better life.

As a final historical note of relevance, there is, it’s worth noting, a history of struggle at Thomas Built Buses in High Point that is part of our movement. In the summer of 1958, workers at what was then known as the Perley A. Thomas Car Works plant in High Point waged a victorious 10-day strike in order to win higher piece rate pay and block

**Body Plant,  
Union Agree;  
Strike Ends**

HIGH POINT, July 28 (UPI)—Workers at the P. A. Thomas Car Works ratified an agreement today ending their week-old strike over wage demands. Some workers returned to their jobs at the school bus body firm today. Full production was expected to resume Tuesday. Under the agreement, assembly line workers will get an additional 12 to 16 cents per unit produced by the firm, plus 14 cents on each unit produced since the dispute arose. The 200 workers of the plant went out on strike a week ago Friday after talks between management and the United Auto Workers International Union broke down. Union and company officials confirmed that the agreement met the demands of workers who said changes in bus models last May caused their earnings to drop.

*A story from page B5 of the July 29, 1958 edition of the Greensboro Daily News tells the story of the conclusion of the 10-day strike by 200 members of UAW Local 63 at the Perley A. Thomas Car Works school bus plant in High Point.*



Members of UAW Local 2406 at DTNA's Memphis Parts Distribution Center take part in a practice picket at their facility.

the company from implementing what amounted to a wage cut. On July 17, 1958 at midnight, the 200 workers at Thomas — who were, at that time, members of UAW Local 63 — walked off the job to reverse a cut in take-home pay for assembly line workers implemented by management. The strike at Thomas ultimately led to a victory for workers. In the settlement that ended the strike, workers won an increase in the piece rate of 12 to 16 cents per unit. (At this time, workers at Thomas were paid by piece rate — not by an hourly wage.) They also won back pay of 14 cents per unit going back to the start of the piece rate dispute in May of that year. An important factor in the quick, victorious resolution of this struggle was the favorable timing of the strike. Workers struck right at the summer peak season for school bus production. At the time of the strike, management was desperate to get as many school buses produced as possible in preparation for the start of the school year in August. This made the company particularly eager to settle the strike. Much like the UAW at DTNA in 2024, the members of UAW Local 63 at the Perley A. Thomas Car Works plant *struck while the iron was hot* and won their demands in 1958.

Our UAW struggle at DTNA must be viewed within this broader historical context. By standing up this year for justice, dignity, and a better life for working people, UAW workers at DTNA built upon this proud history of struggle. We have contributed to the fight for a better world for the working class in this area and beyond.

This struggle continues.

**BEN SMITH** is a member of UAW Local 5287.