

Labor Upsurge in the North American Automobile Transition: Towards a New Industrial and Labor Relations Stage?

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Abstract

Manyscholars have observed that the North American labor movement is experiencing a resurgence. Whilst spanning different economic sectors, the resurgence is a striking phenomenon in the auto sector across all three North American countries. After decades of union decline, concessionary bargaining, and labor laws broken by employers and pro-business governments, a new labor movement momentum has become a common feature of the post-pandemic “new normal.” This resurgence is manifested in increased labor rights and collective bargaining gains coupled with a socially sanctioned union voice to fight back for better wages and working

conditions and the right to engage freely in union organizing and collective bargaining. Conceptually, the structural, associational, societal, and institutional power exercised by labor are all gaining in strength. This became most apparent across North American countries during the 2023 automobile labor strikes. The objective of this paper is to analyze the recent labor upsurge in the North American automobile industry. Our thesis is that the labor upsurge is part of a critical juncture unfolding amid a deep transition within the auto industry towards a paradigm of new electric mobilities and a renegotiation of the employment relationship. This opens a window of opportunity for labor to tip the balance of power in its favor. The paper identifies the productive and permissive conditions that both foster and restrain labor's possibilities, within the context of the industrial and labor regime legacies of each country.

Keywords

automobile industry – Canada – labor upsurge – Mexico – USA

1 Introduction

Labor union battles have increased in post-pandemic North America, and labor is gaining renewed momentum in its struggle for economic and social justice. The high visibility United Autoworkers (UAW) strike in the U.S. during the summer of 2023, and the concurrent Unifor labor contract negotiations that secured similar gains in wages and fringe benefits for Canadian autoworkers following two short strikes, support the idea that auto labor is back after years of enduring shrinking employment and concessionary bargaining. In Mexico, the advent of a New Labor Law (NLL) in tandem with binding mechanisms in the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) to enforce ILO's Fundamental Labor Rights provides further evidence of labor gains. Unusual for the Mexican context, battles have unfolded under the umbrella of these new labor institutions, such as at GM Silao, where workers prevailed in their fight for the right to freely organize and negotiate. This is seen in Mexico as evidence that *a new labor model* is evolving (Alcalde, 2020; Naciff, 2023), and that there is a new labor movement in Mexico (Hermanson, 2023).

Labor unrest is not limited to the auto sector. The U.S. Worker Empowerment Research Network held a symposium in 2022 about *the new labor activism* and its sustainability, with a focus on the largest labor mobilization and unionization since the 1930s (Cornfield, 2023). In fact, over the last few years, different

sectors and countries worldwide have witnessed increased labor activism. The case of platform workers is salient. Trappmann et al. (2020) identify over 500 cases globally of labor unrest in this novel pattern between 2017 and 2020. In North America, recent accounts of such battles and labor gains by some specialized journalists and activists employ mainly impressionistic and descriptive narratives (see Moody (2023), *Wall Street Journal* (2023) and Malinski (2023), among others). Elrod (2023) offers a variant of such accounts in which he argues that rather than seeing a new labor movement or simply a shift in the balance of forces, there is a new class-consciousness emerging in the United States.

The academic research literature treats the labor upsurge mostly as an instance of a normal cyclical fluctuation of labor successes and failures, an instance in which the labor movement presently enjoys an upswing in its fortunes. There are three prevailing explanations of the causes of the upswing. One emphasizes structural factors such as labor institutions (laws, public offices, tribunals, etc.), labor market conditions, and industry composition (Wright, 2005; Kimeldorf, 2013). A second approach stresses the agency of employers and labor unions—based on such factors as resources, strategies, and expertise—as the key dimension in the evolution of labor relations and labor conflicts (Clawson, 2003; Lafer, 2017; Windha, 2017). Some authors emphasize the role of the state in mediating and managing the employment relationship as a key factor (Eidlin, 2018). Norris and Kerrisey (2023) show that in the history of American labor both structural and agency factors, as well as the role of the state, have been important and are intertwined with race and gender dynamics. Yet, in their account, labor power—understood as union density—acts as an independent variable. In a third approach, exemplified by classic industrial relations theory, the evolution of labor unions and shifts in the balance of power between labor and capital are part of the implicit tension, negotiations and conflicts intrinsic to the management-labor relationship (Dunlop, 1958; Kochan et al., 1986; Katz et al., 2017). The bargained outcomes of the relationship depend upon the broad political economic environment and the strategic and workplace levels at which both parties interact. Although bargaining power is key in these studies, the role of power relations remains largely underdeveloped.

There is a need for frameworks and analysis that more properly show how and why labor is now experiencing an upsurge and that examine the reach and implications of the upsurge in terms of both the labor-management relationship and the broader industrial and labor relations regime. By developing and applying a multilevel perspective on windows of opportunity and power resources, this paper seeks to address this lacuna.

Our arguments and evidence focus on the ongoing technological transition in manufacturing and labor-management struggles taking place in the automobile industry in the United States, Mexico and Canada. The underlying question of the paper is: What is the nature, scope, and implications of the present labor upsurge in the North American automobile industry?

We first develop our analytical framework arguing that the labor upsurge is occurring at a critical juncture that has opened a window of opportunity for labor in terms of enhanced structural, associational, societal and institutional power resources. We then identify and describe the productive and permissive conditions shaping this critical juncture with evidence drawn from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. This is followed by analyses of the 2023 UAW labor negotiations and strikes, Unifor's parallel labor negotiations in Canada, and the impact of recent institutional reforms and labor struggles on autoworkers and wages in Mexico. The final section of the paper summarizes the main analytical findings and assesses the validity and explanatory power of our propositions.

2 Analytical Framework and Propositions

We contend that the recent labor resurgence in North America is not just an upswing phase in a recurring cycle, such that the current period of increased labor-management conflict will end as the pendulum swings back in favor of management. A problem with studies that subscribe to a pendulum theory is that they do not account for the fact that the pattern from one cycle to the next may vary according to changes in environmental conditions, industrial trajectory, and the balance of power between actors. Consequently, they cannot distinguish between the possibilities for either continuity or economic and social disruption that may occur during each cycle.

To construct a framework (see Figure 1) with which to analyze labor's renewed momentum, we draw on concepts of critical junctures, punctuated equilibrium, power resources and sociotechnical transition. Our initial premise is that the current labor upsurge in the North American auto industry is part of a critical juncture. A critical juncture refers to "... relatively short periods of time during which there is a heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest" as they have more autonomy and influence compared to periods of regular institutional stasis (Capoccia and Keleman 2007: p. 349; see also Rinscheid et al., 2021). The particularity of the current critical juncture is that it is unfolding during an epochal sociotechnical transition within manufacturing industry towards more

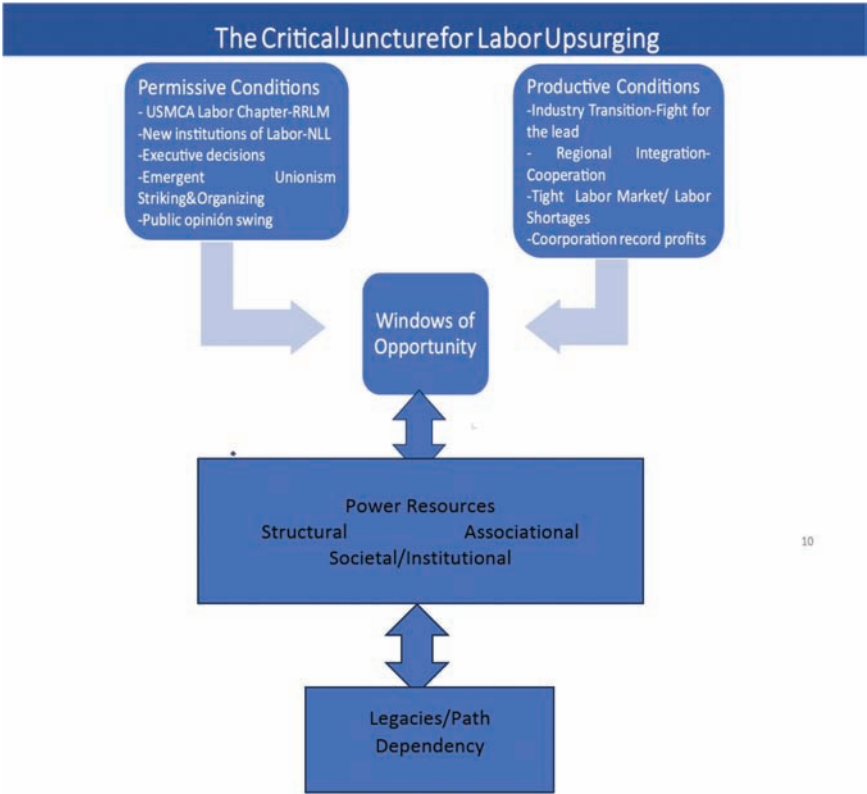


FIGURE 1 Scheme of a framework with which to analyze labor’s renewed momentum.
SOURCE: AUTHORS’ ELABORATION.

sustainable decarbonized production and new mobilities.¹ In the automobile industry, the drive to engineer new electric vehicle propulsion systems reflects this transition. At the same time, there is a movement towards establishing binding mechanisms to enforce fundamental human and labor rights across borders and supply chains. International and national forces are pushing for trade agreements and institutions that tie labor standards to preferential trade access. The labor chapter in the U.S.–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) and its Rapid Response Labor Mechanism (RRLM) reflect this movement by making

1 Sustainable transition is a long-term process of transformative change towards more sustainable societies and involves multi-scale transformation in industrial, actors, markets, and power balances (Grin et al., 2011; Markard et al., 2012; Avelino and Wittmayer, 2015). The sociotechnical perspective underscores that a sustainable transition implies changes in industrial regimes, political and institutional arrangements, market and demand structures, governance mechanisms, as well as social values, frames, and legitimization processes (Geels et al., 2017; Sovacool et al., 2018; Covarrubias and Ramirez, 2020).

preferential market access conditional on compliance with ILO fundamental labor standards.² The European Union is also pushing for corporate commitments to foster sustainable behavior in companies' operations across their supply chains.³ Thus, the sociotechnical transition in the industry has enhanced labor's structural and institutional power resources, through both a new technological paradigm and new institutions for labor rights.⁴

A critical juncture coupled with, or derived from, an exogenous crisis or shock opens a window of opportunity which actors can take advantage of to advance their agendas. The fundamental nature of the current industry transition opens an unusual window of opportunity for management and labor to redefine the terms of the employment relationship. This is especially true in the automobile sector that lies at the very center of the transition. Over several previous decades, the neoliberal era had tipped the balance of power towards management. If labor can effectively combine and mobilize available power resources, the present window of opportunity offers the possibility of moving the balance of power in favor of labor.

Punctuated equilibrium theory proposes that a confluence of different streams of events can lead to shocks and crises that punctuate a long-established and stable trajectory (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones and Baumgartner, 2012; Bergek and Onufrey, 2024). We suggest that the current labor upsurge holds the potential to produce such change, since it coincides not only with a major industrial transition but also with shifts in public policy, an institutional reconfiguration, changing balances of power, swings in public opinion, and new social and political movements. The potential for change means that the recent labor upsurge could lead to a labor movement with greater muscle to shape the employment relationship and contribute, in the medium to long

2 The ILO Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work obligates governments, employers and workers' organizations to uphold five basic human values: "freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining [which the RRLM aims directly to do]; the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor; the effective abolition of child labor; the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation; and a safe and healthy working environment" ILO (n.d.).

3 This is called Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (CSDD) for a Just Transition. See European Commission (Directive 2024/1760). In https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/doing-business-eu/sustainability-due-diligence-responsible-business/corporate-sustainability-due-diligence_en.

4 Power resources theory focuses on the conditions by which labor can advance its interests. As originally proposed by Wright (2000) and Silver (2023), it identifies the structural and associational sources of labor bargaining power—with the former stemming from workplace and marketplace position in the economy, and the latter coming from trade union workers' organizational capabilities.

term, to a transition from the current industrial and labor relations regime to one more labor friendly and equitable. Of course, this is but one of a possible range of outcomes of change and the window of opportunity could close with opposite and/or unexpected outcomes for labor.

Soifer (2012) distinguishes between permissive and productive conditions operating at critical junctures. The former enable change by loosening the constraints on agency while the latter produce divergence by shaping the timing, sequence, and rhythm of change in different jurisdictions. We identify five major factors shaping the permissive conditions leading to the recent labor resurgence in North America: worker activism from below and the reform of labor organizations; the USMCA labor chapter, including its RRLM; legal and government actions favorable to labor; an emergent and more militant unionism with an increased propensity to strike; and, a pro-labor swing in public opinion. While the first three of these conditions enhance institutional power resources for labor, the latter two foster an associational and societal power environment that is more pro-labor.

The productive conditions for the upsurge include the technological transition in the automobile industry and the competition between trade and market blocs to lead the transition; the heightened need for regional cooperation within North America that this struggle entails; tightening labor markets generated by post-pandemic labor shortages and the shortage of needed skills; and, the greater share of the social product captured by capital, as reflected in the record corporate profits of North American automakers and widening income inequality. In sum, these offer more favorable structural power resources for labor.

Windows of opportunity that occur at critical junctures do not operate in a vacuum. Social, economic, and political trajectories are path dependent, reminding us that history matters (Kay, 2005) and that actors' choices are embedded in institutionally entrenched arrangements. They are ingrained in stable routines, industrial and technological regimes, government policies, and ways-of-thinking that restrain change due to lock-in mechanisms, network effects, increasing returns, and hidden costs (Bergek and Onufrey, 2014; Geels, 2022). In other words, self-reinforcing feedback mechanisms sustain continuity and fetter change.

The current window of opportunity is interacting with labor movements in the three North American countries that each reflect distinctive legacies and path dependency. Between 1934 and 1982, the Mexican labor movement developed as state-led, "corporatist" unionism that facilitated capital accumulation and reinforced one-party hegemonic rule by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). After the 1982 debt crisis and the shift to neoliberal reform, the Mexican system devolved into a pattern of preemptive

union organization that offered employers “protection” collective bargaining agreements directed at containing wage growth and downplaying workers’ rights. This form of unionism greatly impeded the right of Mexican workers to freely organize and bargain, as well as the right to strike, and was implicated in real wage stagnation. In Mexico’s finished vehicle sector, the majority of plants remain organized at the plant or enterprise level by unions affiliated with the non-democratic Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM). There are, however, a few democratic and independent unions organized at vehicle plants, including Nissan-Cuernavaca and the Volkswagen and Audi plants in Puebla (Tuman and Erlingsson, 2019, 2023).

The Wagner Act of 1935 (National Labor Relations Act) and subsequent legislation established the basic contours of the industrial relations system in the U.S. Reflecting a liberal approach, the U.S. federal government developed the capacity to intervene to resolve disputes and certify union elections. In comparative terms, however, efforts to unionize have rested principally with workers, and the state has played a minor role in bargaining. Significantly, the U.S. labor movement has been swimming against the current ever since the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, legislation that restricted the activities and power of labor unions by allowing U.S. state governments to enact right-to-work laws banning closed union shops. By 2023, a total of 26 states had right-to-work legislation in force while some also added right-to-work to their state constitutions (National Council on State Legislatures, 2023).⁵ Restrictions on workers’ right to organize and the increased capacity of employers to counter attempts to unionize their workplaces resulted in shrinking union resources, membership rates and capacities (cf., US Department of the Treasury, 2023). In this context, the United Auto Workers (UAW) has seen a steady decline in union membership partly due to industrial restructuring and the growth of assembly plants located in states with right-to-work laws. This context has pushed the UAW to gain members in other sectors, including higher education, where it has backed efforts by graduate assistants to engage in collective bargaining.

Whilst the Canadian legal framework governing unionization and collective bargaining is broadly similar to the United States, the Canadian labor movement developed in an institutional environment friendlier towards labor and the protection of workers’ rights.⁶ Unionization rates are higher in Canada in comparison to the US and Mexico with 29% of Canadian workers unionized

5 Perhaps reflective of the labor upsurge, Michigan repealed right-to-work legislation in 2023.

6 For example, compared to the United States, Canadian labor law and rules governing union certification, gaining a first contract, strikes and unfair labor practices are more union-friendly. There are no “right-to-work” laws in any jurisdiction in Canada and all workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement must pay union dues.

in 2022, 19% in the private sector and over 65% in the public sector. In recent decades, industrial decline has eroded private sector union membership and posed a major challenge for Canadian labor. The employment decline in vehicle manufacturing has been striking, but the CAW/Unifor, the union representing Canadian autoworkers, responded by growing its membership through mergers and new organizing across many other sectors.⁷ Although less than 15% of Unifor's membership is in the auto industry, size and diversity of the union enhances the associational power of autoworkers by providing the financial ability to sustain long strikes and enabling the union to exercise political influence, not only regarding policies in support of the auto industry but also broader social policy issues.

From a power resource perspective, automotive labor in Canada has been mostly constrained by structural factors, while in the US and Mexico it has been more constrained by institutional factors and workers in the Mexican case bear the further heavy legacy of limited associational and societal power resources.

We summarize our framework in Figure 1.

2.1 *Productive Conditions*

This section describes the underlying productive conditions within the North American automotive industry and the structural power resources shaping labor's position.

2.1.1 The Auto Industry Transition and the Lead by Chinese Firms

The auto sector is transitioning towards a new sociotechnical paradigm of electrified transportation and new mobilities. This globally powerful and costly transition finds U.S. corporations and institutions lagging-behind their Chinese counterparts and lacking the technical and skill resources to react rapidly.

Altenburg et al. (2022) argue that China used the electromobility paradigm shift to catch-up technologically and, under strategic guidance from the Chinese state, became both the lead market and home to leading electric vehicle (EV) manufacturers. The Alliance for Automotive Innovation points out that "China dominates the critical mineral global supply chain and EV battery manufacturing, creating potential long-term economic security risks [to the U.S.]" (Alliance for Automotive Innovation, 2020: p. 4).

7 In 2013, CAW worked with the CEP to form a new union, Unifor, currently the largest private sector union in Canada with 320 000 members across diverse sectors.

In 2022, global EV sales reached 10 million, 60% of which was sold in China which now accounts for more than half of the electric fleet worldwide. Europe is the second largest market with the United States third with just an 8% share of global EV sales (IEA, 2023). China is the front-runner across most of the emerging global EV value chain, including for critical minerals, lithium-ion batteries, electric components and systems, and is also a leader in the development of sodium-ion and lithium-iron-phosphate batteries. Chinese early dominance extends to the firm level. In 2022, BYD ranked first in global EV sales, followed by Tesla and VW. Two more Chinese companies, SAIC and Geely, completed the quintet of leading global EV producers (Statista, 2023).

In the North American market, the entry of Chinese vehicle and parts producers in Mexico, while initially limited, is presenting a challenge to the “Detroit-3” (GM, Ford and Stellantis, hereafter “D-3”) and other multinational firms. In particular, the D-3 and policy-makers express concern that Chinese EV firms will use Mexico as a low-cost export platform to reach the U.S. and Canadian markets (any such move would, however, require compliance with USMCA regional content rules to avoid tariffs, a potential constraint).⁸ Likewise, the growth of Chinese imports and production in Mexico may potentially rival Nissan, GM, and Volkswagen, the leading firms which presently account for 43% of Mexico’s domestic vehicle sales. Among Chinese vehicle producers, JAC operates a joint venture in Mexico (Giant Motors) that produces heavy trucks and buses, but recently, it added assembly lines for EVs and other internal combustion passenger cars. Thus far, China’s focus in Mexico appears to have been on penetrating the Mexican vehicle market, principally through vehicle imports in Mexico. Chinese vehicle sales reached 9% of Mexican domestic market in 2024 (Chinese vehicle production in Mexico has remained at low levels, and there have been no Chinese vehicle exports from Mexico to the U.S.) (INEGI 2024c; AMIA 2024). Nevertheless, the planned entry of BYD, China’s largest EV producer, poses a potential challenge. While initially delayed, BYD is moving forward to open an EV manufacturing plant in Mexico with a planned capacity of 300 000 units—although the firm notes that production from this plant will be oriented to the Mexican market (Mexico News Daily 2024). Against this backdrop, the incoming Trump administration has threatened to impose a 25% tariff on vehicle imports from Mexico, partly to discourage

8 At present, approximately 20 Chinese automotive parts plants operate in Mexico, although a very small percentage represent Tier 1 supplies to OEM firms (estimates from Mexican economic census data, INEGI 2024b; other data in Covarrubias et al., 2024). Driven by nearshoring, some Chinese parts producers have increased direct investment in Mexico (El Economista 2023). There is no clear evidence that there have been “spillovers” of technology from Chinese auto firms to Mexican producers.

Chinese firms from using Mexico as an export platform (New York Times, 2024). Beyond Mexico, the D-3 also express concern about the potential for import competition of vehicles directly from China.

The sinuous, costly, and long-term nature of the EV transition is driving the automotive firms and their governments in North America to seek new production alliances and strategies to ease the path to a transformed industry (Covarrubias and Ramirez, 2020). Chinese automakers' leading position in EV production adds an additional incentive for North American automakers to build such strategic alliances. However, the responses of the Detroit-3 to this challenge have also created competitive pressures leading to heightened anxiety among workers, particularly when such alliances have involved joint venture battery plants in the U.S. that are not covered by collective bargaining agreements.

2.1.2 Rebuilding Regional Cooperation and Strategic Alliances

U.S.-based automakers and public decision makers need to foster an environment at the regional level that will facilitate the retooling and relaunch of a transformed North American auto industry. There is a growing awareness among U.S., Canadian, and Mexican policy makers that to achieve the transition to a new industrial and energy paradigm requires the development of a coordinated plan for the continental region. Central to this plan is 'nearshoring', which entails building production capacity across the EV value chain in North America to reduce reliance on Chinese production.⁹ In 2022, the Biden and López Obrador administrations initiated a High-Level Economic Dialogue (HLED) "to include increasing commercial cybersecurity coordination, enhancing supply chain coordination in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and semiconductor ecosystems, information sharing on economic opportunities, improving trade facilitation and border infrastructure, and advancing workforce development" (Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, 2023).

The Canadian government argues that Canada is positioned to benefit from the EV transition with Ontario and Quebec becoming both a hub for EV production and a strategic supply chain link in the development of an integrated North American EV industry. Canada possesses reserves of lithium, cobalt, nickel, and graphite and the 2020 Canada-US Joint Action

9 Generated by the disruption of global supply chains caused by the COVID 19, the U.S.-China commercial clash and the Russia-Ukraine war, nearshoring has generated increased FDI flows into Mexico. Presently, as many as 100 new projects amounting to \$33 billion have been announced, mostly to the automotive sector (Forbes, December 5, 2023).

Plan for Critical Minerals Collaboration seeks to build downstream value and enhance North American capacity to refine and process these critical mineral inputs for EV lithium-ion batteries.¹⁰ Abundant supplies of low cost “clean” hydroelectric and nuclear power provide a competitive advantage to Canada in the production of EV batteries and battery components. Similarly, Mexico has launched the *Plan Sonora de Energías Renovables*, to lead the Mexican transition by exploiting lithium deposits located in Northern Mexico and become a link in an eventual continental supply chain for EVs.

2.1.3 Labor Shortages and a Tighter Labor Market

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, both the U.S. and Canadian economies have experienced significant labor shortages, and this has enhanced worker power within the labor market. At the close of 2023, the U.S. unemployment rate sat at 3.7%, close to historical lows. In the wake of the pandemic, a cohort of younger working-age Americans appeared unwilling to take jobs with wages and working conditions they view as unattractive, unrewarding, and precarious. The hardships and risks at work during the pandemic exposed the vulnerability of low-wage jobs and remote working led many to demand a better work-life balance. In addition, significant numbers of workers dropped out of the U.S. workforce (the so-called Great Resignation), so that there are now many more posted jobs than available workers (according to the US National Association of Manufacturers). For manufacturing workers earning more than \$30 an hour on average, the problem is not pay but also perception. Beyond the dearth of available workers, there is also a serious mismatch and gap between the skill levels of available workers and the skill requirements of jobs (National Skills Coalition 2024).

Labor market conditions in Canada mirror those in the U.S. with continued labor shortages, primarily in the low wage service sector and construction. Although the Bank of Canada's aggressive interest rate-hiking cycle to combat the sharp uptick in inflation has begun to slow the Canadian economy and soften labor market conditions, the unemployment rate remains below pre-pandemic average levels. Recruiting and retaining skilled labor remains a significant challenge for Canadian manufacturers.

In Mexico, the maquiladora industry and the relocation to Mexico of manufacturing capacity by U.S.-based corporations historically helped ease labor shortages in the United States. However, recently Mexico has experienced labor shortages of its own. There are between 1.2 and 1.6

¹⁰ Such claims need to be treated with a certain degree of skepticism. Canadian annual production of cobalt and lithium is currently very small. Although much greater than known reserves in the U.S., Canadian reserves of critical minerals are modest by global standards.

million unfilled vacancies and 75% of Mexican managers report their main problem is finding workers, especially qualified ones in the manufacturing, wholesale trade, electricity, water, gas, and agriculture sectors. Labor turnover aggravates the lack of available workers. The Mexican labor market has tightened with the unemployment rate now at approximately 3% (INEGI, 2024a). The post-pandemic nearshoring trend has led to new manufacturing investment in Mexico, accelerated economic growth and increased the demand for labor.

2.1.4 Record Corporate Profits

While workers' real wages have been eroded by inflation, corporate profits, including automaker profits, are setting new records. The Economic Policy Institute reports that among Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis combined, "profits skyrocketed from 2013 to 2022, totaling \$250 billion" with a further \$32 billion forecast for 2023 (Hersch 2023). According to Trading Economics (2023), "corporate profits in Canada, hit an all-time high in the fourth quarter of 2022." In Mexico, the 500 largest firms increased sales at an annual rate of 7.5% between 2012 and 2022 but in 2022, the year-over-year increase hit 18.2% and profits increased by 16% (Expansión, 2023).

2.2 *Permissive Conditions*

Permissive conditions weaken constraints on the agency of actors and potentially increase labor's institutional and societal power resources.

2.2.1 Worker Activism from Below and the Reform of Labor Organizations

More recent internal structural reform and changes in leadership in US and Canadian autoworker unions have strengthened the ability and power of rank-and-file members to effect change within their union and provided an impetus for the labor upsurge around 2023 bargaining. In Mexico, new independent actors, advocacy groups and activists have teamed up to support workers and encourage them to form free and independent worker organizations.

The UAW has a long history of insurgent rank-and-file movements demanding internal reform and a more aggressive stance when negotiating with employers but the UAW's Administration Caucus was able to exercise its centralized power and control to marginalize and suppress rank-and-file dissent.¹¹ However, in

11 For example, the New Directions Movement (NDM) emerged in 1986 opposed to the UAW's turn towards concessionary bargaining and labor-management partnerships. After a long legal battle, Jerry Tucker, a leading NDM activist, was elected as UAW Region 5 Director but was defeated by intense politicking by the UAW Administration Caucus when he sought re-election in 1989.

2017 the UAW found itself in the midst of a major corruption scandal that eventually saw 13 senior union officials, including two former presidents, serve prison time (Goeddeke and Masters, 2021).¹² This opened a political window that allowed a reform current in the union to gain traction. Drawing inspiration from the earlier grassroots reform campaign waged by Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), the UAW-Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) was launched in 2019 and after a hard-fought campaign won a “one member, one vote” system for the direct election of top union officials (King, 2023). In the first UAW direct election held in March 2023, Shawn Fain, running for President, and other members of the UAWD slate narrowly won election on a platform, “... promising more militancy and rank-and-file participation” (Greenhouse, 2023).

Resistance to bargaining concessions and rejection of UAW union-management joint relationships led Canadian autoworkers to leave the UAW in 1985 to form the CAW committed to social unionism and class-based representation (Gindin, 1989; Ross and Savage, 2024). Although the CAW’s constitution and internal structure were intended to achieve a more “democratic union,” the CAW Administration caucus continued to exercise centralized control to quell rank-and-file dissent and ‘manage’ leadership elections (Ross and Savage, 2024). Major structural changes came, however, when the CAW joined with CEP in a 2011/13 project to democratize union practices and build a new union—Unifor (Wilson, 2019; Ross and Savage, 2024). Unifor’s first president resigned in 2022 over a corruption incident (albeit one dwarfed in scale and scope by the UAW corruption scandal!) and Lana Payne became the first CAW/Unifor president to win a contested election without the official endorsement of the union’s National Executive Board. The fraught 2022 leadership contest, that pitted Payne against a close ally of the previous president, saw members of Payne’s Forward Together slate easily elected to the union’s top positions. Their decisive victory “meant that her team’s reform mandate was clear.” (Ross and Savage, 2024; p. 232).

Despite the institutional constraints created by state corporatism in Mexico, workers in some finished vehicle, engine, and automotive parts plants have managed to gain autonomy and institutionalize union democracy; this pattern emerged initially during periods when the Mexican state faced legitimacy crises and sought to allow limited liberalization in the labor sector (e.g., the periods of 1968–1975 and 1989–1992). For example, in the assembly plants of

12 The federal investigation into the union revealed that top UAW officials had received auto company payoffs in exchange for contract concessions and used members’ union dues to fund lavish personal lifestyles.

Nissan-Cuernavaca, Volkswagen-Puebla, Ford-Cuautitlán, and Sealed Power-DF, workers either broke off from the CTM or pushed for significant autonomy from the confederation, while also institutionalizing internal democracy. The conditions of union autonomy and internal democracy created a space for rank-and-file activism that led to demands for higher wages, resistance to flexible work rules and industrial restructuring, and engaging in strikes (Tuman, 2003: pp. 45–112; Tuman, 2019; Tuman and Erlingsson, 2023). In some of these cases, workers' movements were supported by outside labor groups, including the Authentic Labor Front (Frente Auténtico del Trabajo) in Mexico, or unions and activists based in the U.S., Canada, Brazil, and Germany. Even when movements in some democratic unions in the finished vehicle sector ended in defeat by management and the state (e.g., Ford-Cuautitlán in 2009), prior worker activism created a foundation for future movements, including in the current juncture.

In Mexico, the history of labor activism from below and more recent reforms have facilitated the growing associational capacity for some unions in the Mexican automotive industry. This is apparent in cases brought to the RRLM in which new independent actors, advocacy groups and activists have teamed up to support workers and encourage them to form free and independent worker organizations.¹³ The Sindicato Independiente Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Industria Automotriz (National Independent Union of Workers in the Automotive Industry, or SINTTIA), for example, led the movement for an independent labor organization and collective bargaining at the General Motors Silao assembly plant, while SNITIS-Movimiento 20/32 led the organization of labor in the maquiladora industry in Northern Mexico. These new actors mainly are working in the automotive sector and gradually expanding into other firms, locations and sectors, and present a unique opportunity to dislodge the CTM from its privileged position in the finished vehicle sector (or to push CTM unions into more democratic forms of internal governance). Similarly, existing independent labor organizations are taking advantage of the RRLM to update and relaunch labor organizing initiatives by either presenting or supporting cases before the RRLM. Thus, labor's voice has been growing in Mexico due to the actions and initiatives of these newly emergent and existing actors, backed by the solidarity and in-field organizing support supplied by the AFL-CIO, United Steelworkers, UAW and Unifor, as well as international labor rights and social dialogue organizations

13 These new actors include the SINTTIA, Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana (LSOM), Transformación Sindical (TS), and Sindicato Nacional Independiente de Trabajadores de Industrias y de Servicios (SNITIS-MOVIMIENTO 20/32).

such as IndustriALL, International Workers Confederation, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Maquila Solidarity Network, Re-think Trade, and the International Lawyers Assisting Workers Network.

2.2.2 A New Generation of Labor Arrangements in North American Trade Agreements: The USMCA RRLM

North American governments are promoting a new (third) generation of labor arrangements linking preferential trade to compliance with ILO Fundamental Labor Rights. During the negotiation of the USMCA to replace NAFTA, the three countries agreed to establish and enforce a RRLM to address complaints regarding violations of the right of freedom of association and collective bargaining. It makes access to USMCA's preferential tariffs conditional on resolving labor rights complaints and enforcing appropriate remedies.

2.2.3 Legislative and Government Support for Labor

Governments in all three countries have acted to foster a more progressive environment in which progress can be made to improve labor rights, wages and working conditions.

The government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) in Mexico made the enforcement of a new labor law (NLL) and minimum wage increases its primary commitments in support of labor.¹⁴ It reformed labor institutions, including introducing a new system of labor courts within the judicial branch. Claudia Sheinbaum, who is Mexico's new president and a close ally of AMLO, is expected to continue the pro-labor agenda. In the U.S., the Biden administration expressed support for labor during labor disputes, most recently during the 2023 UAW strikes, and pushed the U.S. Congress to raise the minimum wage threshold. It also "passed the Protecting the Right to Organize Act and the Public Sector Freedom to Negotiate Act, as well as issuing an executive order to promote the rights of federal employees to collectively bargain; created the White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment to support worker organizing and bargaining; required the use of project labor agreements on federal construction projects above \$35 million; promoted the 'know your rights' initiatives to provide workers with information about their organizing and bargaining rights; and set up a new rule to raise wage standards of construction workers." (U.S. Department of

14 During AMLO's presidential term, Mexico's federal minimum wage has increased every year. At the beginning of his administration in 2018, it was 88 pesos per day or 5.66 USD. Including the 20% hike announced for 2024, by the end of his administration (2024) the minimum daily wage will have almost tripled to 248.9 pesos or 14.70 USD.

Treasury, 2023). As a direct result of Biden's reshaping of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the number of union election petitions has doubled since 2021 (Jamieson, 2024). The recent reelection of President Trump may erode some of the labor support initiated by the Biden administration, but it is unclear if this alone will be sufficient to reverse the labor upsurge in the U.S.

In Canada, the Trudeau administration moved early in its first term to undo regressive US-inspired labor laws enacted by the previous Conservative government and to introduce pro-labour including paid sick days and anti-scab legislation covering federally regulated workplaces (Canadian Labour Congress, 2023). It also supported the push by the US administration to have Mexico accept the USMCA labor chapter. Canadian federal and provincial governments have progressively increased minimum wages and moved to combat the misclassification of workers as independent contractors. Canadian courts have ruled against provincial government attempts to curtail collective bargaining rights enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

2.2.4 Strikes

A sharp increase in labor union actions and strikes occurred across the three countries. In 2018 and 2019, the number of U.S. workers involved in major work stoppages reached its highest level since the 1980s.¹⁵ After falling sharply during the pandemic, the number of workers involved in major work stoppages again rose sharply and in 2023 the U.S. saw 393 strikes involving more than half a million workers (Labor Action Tracker, ILR-Cornell University). One result of the 2023 labor actions was that unionized workers won an average 6.6% wage hike, the largest since 2007.

Typically, more workdays are lost to strikes in Canada each year than in the entire US, which has nine times the population. Beginning in 2022, Canada experienced a marked uptick in strikes/lockouts and over 6.63 million person days were lost to work stoppages in 2023, the largest number in 40 years. Major strikes occurred among workers in both the federal and Quebec public service sectors, ports and the retail food sector. An unusual upsurge of labor union activity occurred in Mexico following the 2019 Mexican Labor Law Reform and the enactment of the 2020 USMCA labor chapter. Bear in mind that over the last half-century, the voice of the Mexican labor movement was subdued owing to adverse and repressing conditions and, for most of this century, strikes have been scant. As a result, today's labor upsurge in Mexico is only partly reflected in strikes and stoppages. In the Federal jurisdiction, where the main industries,

15 Yet, they remained roughly 70% lower than the levels in the early 1970s and 80% lower than historic peaks.

including the automobile industry, are located, the number of strikes peaked at 55 in 2006 and then diminished to zero in 2014–2015.¹⁶ In 2022, strikes rose to twelve (INEGI, 2023a,b). As we discuss later in the paper, however, there have been recent and episodic strike movements in the Mexican automobile industry that yielded significant change.

2.2.5 Public Opinion

Changes in public opinion have also created more diffuse support for labor activism. Recent U.S. public opinion surveys from Gallup record that 71% of respondents approved of labor unions; this is the highest percentage since 1965, and 23 points higher than the 2010 low point (McCarthy, 2022). Similarly, a Harris/Decima survey conducted in November 2023 reported that 60% of Canadians believe unions have a positive impact for workers they represent; 56% believe that unions and employee associations play a positive role in Canadian society; 70% said unions are still needed today; and, 53% said they are suspicious of government and politicians who try to limit collective bargaining and the political power of unions. The situation in Mexico is somewhat different, as suggested by the World Values Survey (wvs) in 2017. When asked to indicate their degree of confidence in labor unions, only 20% of Mexican respondents reported having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in unions (World Value Survey, 2024). This may reflect the fact that for most people labor unions represented institutions of corruption, geared toward taking advantage of workers.

3 Labor Battles and Developments in the North American Auto Sector

We now address the question of how autoworkers have taken advantage of the window of opportunity afforded by the confluence of productive and permissive conditions in each country to mobilize their associational powers to gain increased organizational capabilities and/or membership and enhance their societal and institutional power. By analyzing the outcomes, especially with regard to wages and working conditions, of the 2023 round of collective bargaining, strikes and struggles in the auto sector, we show how autoworkers have successfully fought to advance their material interests.

¹⁶ In a study of 11 finished vehicle plants in Mexico for the period of 1980 to 2012, Tuman (2019) found that, controlling for many factors, democratic and independent unions exhibited a statistically significant and positive effect ($p < 0.001$) on the number of strike petitions, the number of strikes, and duration of strikes. The opposite tendency was found in vehicle plants controlled by the CTM.

3.1

Collective Bargaining with GM, Ford and Stellantis (D-3) in the United States and Canada in 2023

For the first time since 1999, the UAW’s 2023 round of collective bargaining with the D-3 in the United States coincided with bargaining in Canada between the D-3 and Unifor.¹⁷ Leading into bargaining, the broader economic outlook was similar in both countries with tight labor markets, inflation at the highest level for several decades, and, with declining workers’ real wages and automaker profits at record levels, a growing awareness among workers of persistent and deepening inequality. Workers expressed anger and autoworkers in both countries were willing to fight back to regain some of the ground lost during repeated earlier rounds of concessionary bargaining. Leveraging this conjuncture of political economic conditions to their advantage, both the UAW and Unifor made historic gains during 2023 bargaining. Once the difference in the lengths of the new contracts is taken into account, the outcomes were similar in scope and size (Table 1). However, given their different institutional histories, the two unions deployed strikingly different bargaining strategies.

TABLE 1

Comparison of provisions in UAW (2023–2028) and Unifor (2023–2026) contracts with D-3

Contract provision	UAW	Unifor
Contract length	54 months	36 months
General wage increases	25% over the life of the contract. 11% immediately.	15% over the life of the contract. 10% immediately.
Special adjustment skilled trades	Skilled trades tool allowance \$1.50/hour effective October 2023	2.75% special adjustment effective September 24, 2023 (\$1.39) 2.5% special adjustment effective September 21, 2025 (\$1.37)
Grow-in period	3 years starting at 70% of base rate.	4 years starting at 70% of base rate.

17 Reopened contracts in the early 2000s, and the 2008–2009 GM and Chrysler bankruptcy restructuring crisis, disrupted the normal bargaining cycles in both countries. Following the crisis, the UAW bargained in 2011, 2015 and 2019, whilst Unifor bargained in 2012, 2016, and 2020. The UAW’s 2019 4-year contracts and Unifor’s 2020 3-year contracts were all set to expire in mid-September 2023.

TABLE 1 Comparison of provisions in UAW (2023–2028) and Unifor (2023–2026) contracts with D-3 (*cont.*)

Contract provision	UAW	Unifor
COLA	No COLA fold-in. COLA in Q4 2023 and then quarterly for each subsequent year. COLA formula over the term of the agreement is estimated to generate \$1.78 per hour.	COLA fold-in of \$1.21 prior to 10% base wage increase on September 24, 2023. Quarterly COLA formula reactivated December 2024. COLA formula over the life of the agreement is estimated to accumulate to \$1.61 per hour.
TPT wage rate	New start rate \$21.00	Increased to 70% of prevailing base rate; year 1 \$29.67; year 2 \$30.26; year 3 \$31.16
Conversion of full-time TPT workers	All full-time temporary workers who have three months of continuous service will convert to full-time status at ratification. By end of September 2027 all current Full-time TPT workers will have been converted and their hourly rate will be \$41.17	All full-time TPTs with at least one year of service convert to seniority employees at ratification. No later than August 1, 2026, all remaining full-time temporary workers will have been converted and the TPT program phased-out.
Wage tiers	All CCA, GMCH, and Subsystems members will immediately convert to the main production rate upon ratification (results in immediate wage increases of 36–89%)	No previous lower wage tiers in Canada.
Bonus	Ratification bonus: \$5000 for all workers with at least 90 days service.	\$10 000 productivity and quality bonus paid by end of November 2023 to full-time and full-time temporary workers (\$4000 to part-time temporary workers).

TABLE 1 Comparison of provisions in UAW (2023–2028) and Unifor (2023–2026) contracts with D-3 (*cont.*)

Contract provision	UAW	Unifor
Profit sharing	Continued and extended to temporary workers	No profit sharing in Canada.
Pensions	Traditional members: \$ 5.00 increase in basic benefit. \$50 000 lump sum pre-tax retirement incentive. In progression members: 10% employer contribution to 401(K). Current retirees: \$500 annual payment.	Members hired prior to 2009: \$5.00 increase in the DB basic pension benefit for production members; \$6.00 for skilled trades. GM and Stellantis members receive an extra \$0.60 to rectify previous disparity with Ford members. Members hired after September 2016: transitioned from existing DC plan to an established DB-styled plan. Current retirees: \$125–200 allowance each quarter.
EV transition and employment security provisions	New EV investment secured and/or confirmed. Improved SUB program. UAW-D-3 National Agreements extended to cover production workers at GM, Stellantis joint-venture battery plants and one Ford joint-venture battery plant. New battery plant hires start at 75% of National Agreement base rate. Right to strike over plant closures, outsourcing, and investment.	New EV investment secured and/or confirmed. Improved SUB program. Additional EV transition income supports, including continued contributions to the employer-paid portion of the DC and DB+ pension plans, for workers during retooling in plants producing EVs or EV propulsion components. Moratorium on facility closing during life of the agreement.

SOURCE: DERIVED FROM MASTER AND NATIONAL CONTRACTS WITH UAW AND UNIFOR.

3.1.1 The 2023 UAW Strikes and the Drive to Restore Associational and Societal Power

Several factors converged in 2023 to create a window of opportunity for labor activism and union renewal in the U.S. automobile industry. For several decades, the UAW had experienced a decline in its associational and societal power as the union steadily lost membership. UAW membership fell from just over 1 million in 1983 to 845 000 in 1998, and to just over 400 000 in 2023. As late as the early 1980s, over 90% of vehicles produced in the United States were built with union labor, but union density in vehicle assembly had dropped to below 50% by 2019 (Silvia, 2023: p. 10).

Over repeated rounds of collective bargaining, the UAW leadership routinely had agreed to concessions in exchange for company promises of new investment in plants. Moreover, the union repeatedly failed in its attempts to organize the transplant assembly facilities opened by European and Asian automakers primarily in the U.S. South (Silvia, 2023). Unionized D-3 automakers invoked the need to compete with the non-union transplants as a rationale for holding down UAW wages and seeking other contract concessions.

The legacy of concession bargaining in the US automotive sector dates back to 2003/05¹⁸ and major concessions were central in the 2009 bankruptcy protection restructuring of GM and Chrysler triggered by the global financial crisis. The UAW's acquiescence to company and government demands in 2009 resulted in cost-of-living (COLA) formula provisions being eliminated and the introduction of multiple tiers of workers paid different wage rates for doing the same work. These concessions remained highly contentious issues in 2023.¹⁹

The available evidence suggests that workers' concerns were well founded. Real average hourly wages for U.S. automotive assembly workers—as measured in constant 2010 U.S. dollars—had not increased since the early 2000s and the decline accelerated after the 2009 crisis (see Figure 2).²⁰

18 The pivotal moment establishing the template for what Chaison (2012) labels 'ultra-concessionary bargaining' was the concessions extracted from the UAW by Delphi, the former GM-owned global supplier, in 2003–2005 that introduced tiered wages and benefits into the automotive industry. The D-3 then won similar concessions in 2007 UAW bargaining.

19 The question of the lack of COLA took on renewed urgency as inflation in the U.S. peaked at 9.1% in July 2022, with an annualized inflation rate of 6.5% between 2021 and 2022 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

20 The data are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), Employment, Hours, and Earnings from the Current Employment Statistics survey (National), Average hourly earnings of production and nonsupervisory employees, motor vehicle manufacturing, not seasonally adjusted. We have employed a re-based CPI (2010 = 100) for conversion of nominal wages into constant (real) 2010 U.S. dollars (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

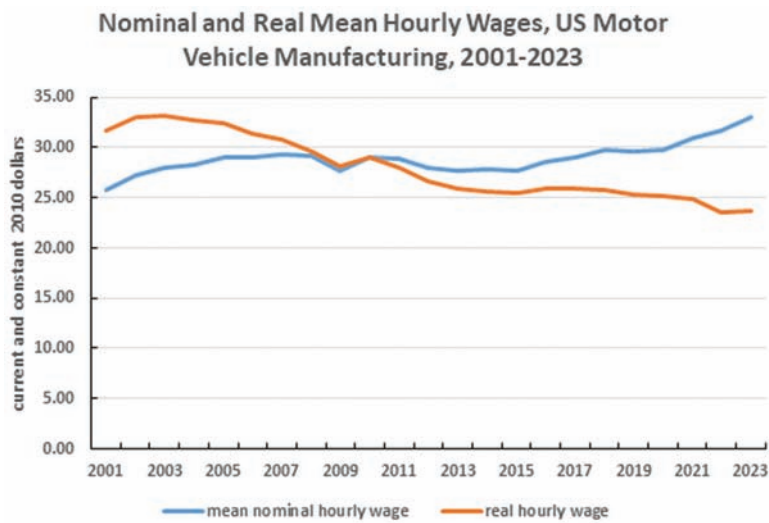


FIGURE 2 Nominal and real mean hourly wages, US motor vehicle manufacturing, 2001–2023.
SOURCE: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (2024).

As the UAW entered the 2023 bargaining round, Fain announced an ambitious agenda: restoring the cost-of-living allowance (COLA), increasing wages by 40%, ending two-tier wages, improving conditions for temporary workers, and restoring retirement benefits lost in 2009. Beyond wages and inflation, workers were also concerned about job security given the impending transition to electric vehicle production. A central challenge for the UAW was that workers at the joint-venture plants the D-3 had initiated with Asian companies to produce EV batteries and battery components were not covered under the D-3 master agreements.²¹ The union was also eager to secure investment pledges for new and existing vehicle plants. Perhaps more important, the union leadership noted that a major high-profile victory with the D-3 would energize the rank-and-file and enhance opportunities for new organizing campaigns among the non-union segment of the industry (Maccarrone 2024: p. 4).

Providing the gap between the initial proposals tabled by Stellantis and the UAW’s announced bargaining demands, the UAW called a strike. The strike was distinctive in several ways. First, for the first time in its history, the union

21 This has included Ultium Cells, a joint venture between GM and LG Energy with facilities in Tennessee, Ohio, and Michigan; Stellantis’ partnership with Samsung (Indiana); and Ford’s partnership with Marshall Battery (Michigan) and the Tennessee Electric Vehicle Center (Tennessee). In September 2024, the UAW won a certification election in Ultium’s plant in Tennessee (Detroit Free Press, 2024).

simultaneously initiated strikes against Ford, GM, and Stellantis. This was in sharp contrast to prior strikes, in which the UAW targeted one OEM to set the pattern for settlements among the D-3. Second, the UAW initially staged work stoppages at a select few plants at each firm, but then steadily increased pressure on management by expanding the scope of the “stand-up strike” to include progressively more plants. The strikes became increasingly more costly to the companies as the union strategically selected plants producing the most profitable products. Ultimately, just 27% of D-3 plants were struck. Third, the UAW leadership used the discourse and rhetoric of social class to frame the conflict with owners.²² Finally, the union sought to enhance its societal power by mounting an aggressive social media campaign to build public support. It seems it worked. A survey found that 60% of respondents supported increased pay for workers during the strike, while 36% (the plurality) of respondents supported the UAW; only 9% supported the companies (NORC, 2023).

After approximately 6 weeks of escalating work stoppages, the union reached new 4.5-year National Agreements with each company with historic gains. Of particular significance were the large initial wage increases, especially for low seniority and temporary workers, the elimination of two-tiered wages and improved wage progression for in-progression workers, restoration of COLA, the shortening of the time taken by temporary workers to convert to seniority status, and the extension of National Agreement coverage to workers at joint-venture EV battery plants. Perhaps as a preemptive measure against the UAW, several non-union plants operated by Hyundai, Volkswagen, Toyota, Honda and Subaru immediately announced wage rate increases of at least 10%.

3.1.2 2023 Unifor-D-3 Bargaining: Restoring Associational Power

Overwhelmingly concentrated in southwestern Ontario adjacent to Detroit, automotive production in Canada is an integral and cohesive part of the Great Lakes auto production region (GLR) encompassing Michigan, Ohio, Ontario, Indiana and Illinois (Rutherford and Holmes, 2014).²³ Thus, ensuring Ontario-based automotive plants remain cost competitive with their regional

22 Jettisoning a long-standing tradition in the UAW, Fain symbolically refused to shake hands with the CEOs of the D-3 when negotiations commenced, preferring instead to meet and shake hands with union members (Labor Notes, 2023).

23 Ontario is home to all the assembly and powertrain facilities operated in Canada by five OEM automakers—GM, Ford, Stellantis, Toyota and Honda. Around 85 percent of Canadian built vehicles are exported for sale in the U.S. market, Ontario-made automotive parts flow across the international border to feed US assembly plants while US-made parts feed Ontario assembly plants.

US counterparts is the ever-present context for both government policy and Unifor's labor negotiations (Holmes, 2022).

Unifor's bargaining goals in 2023 should be understood in the context of the outcomes of the two previous bargaining rounds in 2016 and 2020. Given a steady loss of Canadian vehicle assembly capacity and jobs since 2000, Unifor's prime bargaining objective in 2016 was to secure new D-3 investment commitments (Holmes, 2023). Reflecting a growing awareness of the threat posed by the impending EV transition, securing investment commitments was again the bargaining priority in 2020. Over those two rounds, Unifor succeeded in securing auto making in Canada for the near future.²⁴

However, Unifor made little progress during those negotiations in addressing the steady decline in real wages, a legacy of years of concessionary bargaining. During the 2009 GM and Chrysler bankruptcy-restructuring crisis, the CAW, like the UAW, was forced to accept a wage freeze and the suspension of COLA. The 2012–2016 CAW-D-3 contract reaffirmed the base wage-rate freeze and, to avoid the imposition of the *permanent* two-tier wage system imposed on the UAW in 2011, the CAW reluctantly accepted a grow-in wage progression system. Under this system, all new hires would start at 60 percent of the hourly wage-rate and take ten years to reach the full rate.

Rank-and-file disquiet, especially among younger, more recently-hired workers, over lack of progress on compensation issues in 2016 and 2020 bargaining (Holmes, 2023), highlighted the need to rebuild internal solidarity and associational power within the union.²⁵ The spike in inflation during the pandemic added further pressure to make compensation and benefits the focus of 2023 bargaining.

Unifor publicly announced core 2023 bargaining priorities were: (1) pension improvements for both current and retiree members; (2) improving the wage packet, including restoration of COLA and a reduction of the 8-year grow-in period for new hires; (3) income security protections for members during the retooling of facilities for EV production; and, (4) reaffirmation of investment commitments. In sharp contrast to the UAW's novel 2023 Stand Up Strike and

24 In 2020, Unifor secured commitments for EV production at Ford and Stellantis assembly plants by the mid-2020s, although Ford announced in 2024 that the switch to EV production at Oakville would be delayed until later in the decade. GM announced that it would begin producing battery electric BrightDrop delivery vans at its CAMI plant in Ingersoll, ON. and agreed to reopen its Oshawa Assembly facility, closed in 2018, to produce large ICE pickup trucks.

25 Unifor saw historically narrow votes in favor of contract ratification in 2016 with some large assembly plant locals voting to reject.

open-bargaining strategy, Unifor pursued a conventional pattern bargaining strategy –i.e., choosing a target company with which to establish the terms of the Master Agreement and then pressuring the other two companies to accept the same agreement. Unifor followed the traditional bargaining practice of limiting the details of bargaining progress prior to the announcement of a tentative agreement, held no rallies and made only limited use of social media to educate and build rank-and-file momentum.²⁶

Unifor in late August chose Ford as the target company with which to establish the pattern agreement. The previous agreement was set to expire on Monday, 18 September, four days after the UAW contracts in the United States, and Unifor had a strong (over 98 percent) strike mandate in hand from its membership. Unifor and Ford reached a tentative new 3-year agreement containing significant compensation increases (Table 1). President Lana Payne reported, “[Ford] knew we had the leverage in talks. If we struck, the entire Canadian operation would come to a halt—and most of North America too.”²⁷ Following brief strikes that each lasted less than a day, the union forced both GM and Stellantis to accept the “pattern” that contained wage increases, COLA provisions, bonuses, wage progression and pension improvements identical to those in the Ford. Since the wage increases won by Unifor and the UAW were very similar in percentage terms (Table 2), they should not significantly change the cost competitive relationship of Canadian D-3 plants *viz a viz* US plants.²⁸

To summarize, the UAW and Unifor both won significant wage and benefit gains during 2023 bargaining. For the UAW, winning contract language from GM and Stellantis to extend the UAW agreement to cover workers at joint-venture battery plants was a major gain.²⁹ Building on the momentum generated in 2023, the UAW launched renewed organizing campaigns at several non-union automakers in the U.S. South. Despite past failures, workers at the vw plant in

26 For a critical assessment of the different bargaining strategies deployed by Unifor and the UAW, see Rosenfeld (2023), King (2023) and Leah (2023).

27 Unifor-Ford of Canada Bargaining Report, September 2023, p. 4. The two Ford engine plants in Windsor ON produce 1C engines for a range of Ford vehicles built in the United States, notably the F-series pickup trucks, some of Ford's most profitable and top selling vehicles.

28 Given the greater numbers of temporary workers at US plants, the transfer of temporary workers into regular employees under the new contracts will likely increase aggregate labor costs in the US relative to Canada.

29 No similar union demand was made during Unifor negotiations. Although battery plants were in the early stages of development in Windsor (Stellantis-LG Energy) and St. Thomas (Volkswagen), unlike in the US, none were yet in operation.

TABLE 2 Comparison of UAW and Unifor contract wage rates

Year	UAW 2023 contract (\$USD)				UNIFOR 2023 contract (\$CND)			
	Top rate		Top rate		Top rate		Top rate	
	Production	Skilled trades	Start rate Production	TPT rate	Production	Skilled trades	Start rate production	TPT rate
Rate at end of previous contract	\$32.32	\$36.85	\$18.04	16.67	37.33	44.77	24.26	24.26
End of 2023	35.88	42.40	25.12	25.12	42.39	51.97	29.67	29.67
End of September 2024	36.95	43.68	25.44	27.72	43.23	53.01	30.26	30.26
End of September 2025	38.06	44.99	26.65	32.16	44.52	55.97	31.16	31.16
End of September 2026	39.20	46.34	27.45	39.12	—	—	—	—
End of September 2027	41.16	48.65	28.82	41.17	—	—	—	—
% Increase to end September 2026	17.8%	22.1%	47.7%	92.9%	19.3%	25.0%	28.4%	28.4%
% Increase to April 2028	27.4%	32.0%	59.8%	147.0%	—	—	—	—

Unifor contract expires September 20, 2026, UAW contract expires April 30, 2028. Other than Unifor COLA Fold-in at ratification, rates do NOT include estimated quarterly COLA adjustments. Nominal dollars. 1 CND = 0.73 USD (2024).

Chattanooga TN voted overwhelmingly (73%) to be represented by the UAW in April 2024. The following month the union won compensation increases for workers at Daimler Truck in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia comparable to those won by D-3 workers in 2023, and filed for a certification vote at Mercedes Benz plants in Alabama, a vote that the UAW lost 46 to 54%. In September 2024, the UAW won a certification election in Ultium's plant in Tennessee (Detroit Free Press, 2024).³⁰

3.2 *Mexico: Struggling to Remove Legacies That Have Constrained Associational and Societal Power*

The finished vehicle industry is highly unionized in Mexico, with the majority of the vehicle assembly plants organized by traditional corporatist unions (CTM affiliates). In the auto parts sector, by contrast, unionization rates are lower (although medium and large firms are unionized). Labor organization and structures of collective bargaining continue to be highly fragmented in both automotive parts and vehicle assembly, with unions working at the plant level, which prevents any kind of pattern bargaining from emerging.

As noted previously, however, there has been a history of worker activism from below that resisted the constraints of state-corporatism and provided an important foundation for more recent labor movements in the automobile industry. This is reflected, for example, in recent and episodic cases of significant worker strike and protest movements in Audi's plant in Puebla (which has an independent and democratic union), where workers won a 10.2% increase in wages after 3.5 week strike in early 2024; in Nissan's assembly plant in Aguascalientes, where worker activism between 2022 and 2024 succeeded in the union gaining independence from the CTM after an election and a protracted legal battle with incumbent CTM leaders; and a 2019 strike and protest wave in the maquiladora industry in Matamoros that encompassed more than 25 000 workers in 70 facilities, including many parts producers (Tuman and Erlingsson, 2023; Junta Federal de Conciliación y Arbitraje, 2023; El Economista, 2024).

Without denying the importance of periodic worker protests and activism in Mexico, the recent surge of labor activism in the country also has been facilitated by labor reforms and North American governments using USMCA labor rules. It is reflected in the process for the legitimization of CBA's under

³⁰ After a 7-week strike and rejecting earlier tentative agreements, workers at Boeing represented by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) narrowly approved a new contract giving workers a 38% wage increase over 4-years in early November 2024. This is a further example of the continued labor upsurge.

the NLL and labor complaints filed using the USMCA RRLM. The NLL required unions within a four-year period to submit CBAs for review and eventual approval by workers in a secret, direct, free vote. Of 139 000 registered CBAs, 108 000 were eliminated, 30 552 were approved and 663 were rejected.³¹ In the finished vehicle and engine sector, however, 92.5% of CBAs were approved through legitimation, with the CTM losing in only two plants, GM-Silao and Nissan-Aguascalientes. Under the RRLM, 21 cases alleging labor rights violations have been filed to date in the auto industry.³²

Against this backdrop of workers' activism from below and broader institutional changes, progress is being made toward increasing the associational and societal power of labor in the automotive industry in Mexico. This progress stems partly from the rules and mechanisms of the new labor institutions created by Mexico's NLL and the RRLM contained in the USMCA. Nevertheless, these powers still remain limited, as most workers are not affected by the current transitions and battles. The NLL and the RRLM provide a host of rules and mechanisms that contribute towards a new framework for institutionalizing the employment relationship in Mexico. They strengthen individual and collective labor rights and stress the right of workers to freely organize, negotiate, and sign collective bargaining agreements. Under the RRLM, 21 cases for labor rights violations in the auto sector (including vehicle and the broader parts industry) have been presented (Table 3), especially cases seeking remedy for actions adversely affecting workers' rights to freedom of association and negotiation. All but three of the cases were resolved in favor of workers, including the cases involving General Motors-Silao and Goodyear-San Luis Potosí. Their relevance is perhaps more qualitatively important in that they signal that the U.S. and Canada will not tolerate labor violations in Mexico committed by any firm wishing to have preferential access to their markets.³³

In this context, existing traditional Mexican labor unions have limited themselves to sorting out (and, in some cases, resisting) the new rules and institutions for labor relations and the collective bargaining agreement legitimation process, rather than taking advantage of the new environment

31 CBAs eliminated were inactive or not formally terminated contracts, which confirmed that most of CBAs were protection contracts. Data from Centro Federal de Conciliación y Registro Laboral (<https://www.gob.mx/cfcr1>).

32 Nine more cases have been filled in other industries such as mining, textiles, and services.

33 US and Canada labor institutions are closely overseeing and backing the enforcement of these new rules in Mexico. The US Department of Labor ILAB has committed \$180 million to build or strengthen capacity with regard to labor inspection, labor justice, child labor, rights verification, improving working conditions, as well as labor organizing.

TABLE 3 Rapid response labor mechanism in the Mexican auto industry: cases and actors

Actors	Cases
Emergent actors	
SINTTIA, CATEM	GM Silao; Draxton, Irapuato; Yasaki, Leon; Fränkische Industrial, Silao
Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana	Goodyear, San Luis; PVU Manufacturing, Piedras Negras; Teklas, Aguas; AsiaWay, SLP; Impro Industries, SLP; Pirelli, SLP
Transformación Sindical	Unique Fabricating, Querétaro; Autoliv, Queretaro
SNITIS-MOVIMIENTO 20/32	Tridonex, Matamoros; Panasonic, Reynosa; Tecnologia Modificada-Caterpillar, Nuevo Lare
Sindicato Independiente de Saint Gobain	Saint Gobain, Morelos
Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores del Ramo del Transporte en General, la Construcción y Sus Servicios (SNTTYC)	Servicios Industriales González, Nuevo León
Existing independent actors	
Los Mineros	Mina San Martin, Ztz; Texkid Hierro, Front Coah; Tizapa, Edo de Mexico; Camino Rojo, Zacatecaz
Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT)	INISA, Aguascalientes
ASPA	Aerotransportes MAS, CDMX
Comité Fronterizo de Obreras y Obreros	Fujikura, Piedras Negras
Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de Industria Automotriz, Similares y Conexos Volkswagen de México	vw Puebla
Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Rep Mexicana	Atento Call Center, Hidalgo

SOURCE: AUTHORS’ ANALYSIS BASED ON RRLM ‘CASES AND ACTORS’ DATA.

regarding the employment relationship to advance their members’ interests with respect to wages and working conditions. Proof of this is that contract wages have only slightly improved (Table 4). In the finished vehicle sector, during the five years of the AMLO administration and labor reform, hourly wages increased around 9%, from \$2.30 in 2019 to \$2.51 in 2023—an annual average hike of 4.2 cents.³⁴ Therefore, wages in the Mexican auto industry remain low and highly differentiated.³⁵

Nevertheless, some working conditions have improved. The new institutions of labor and important new rules arising from subcontracting reform have led management to be more compliant with labor regulations and fundamental labor rights. For instance, in the Mexican auto industry in particular, the new rules limiting subcontracting have brought about job security for many workers previously outsourced (Covarrubias and Kuri, 2024).

TABLE 4 Estimated wage increases in the Mexican automobile industry during the USMCA era

Year	Nominal increase (%)	Inflation (%)	Real increase (%)
2019	7.4	3.6	3.8
2020	5.7	3.15	2.5
2021	5.4	7.4	-2
2022	8.6	7.8	.8
2023	8.6	4.6	4

SOURCE: AUTHORS’ ESTIMATES BASED ON CONSUMER PRICE DATA FROM BANCO DE MEXICO AND NOMINAL CONTRACT WAGE CHANGES.

34 This is a rough estimate based on Banco de Mexico’s manufacturing contractual wages from its Sistema de Información Económica. The figures adjust for inflation and projecting on the Mexican automobile industry average hourly wage in 2019 at 2.3 USD (data are from Covarrubias 2020).

35 As an example, we can compare two opposite cases. In 2022, Nissan Civac (Cuernavaca), an independent union with a long history of internal democracy, secured some of the highest wages in the sector, with a mean of 3.53 USD per hour, while at Ford Hermosillo, where a CTM union has long ruled, hourly wages are only 55% of those at Nissan, i.e., a mean of 1.95 USD per hour. Calculated from wage scales (tabulador de salarios) in legitimated collective bargaining agreements in 2022 for both plants, using the mean market (nominal) US dollar-Mexican peso exchange rate for 2022 for conversion to dollars.

4 Discussion and Conclusions: Tying Up Events, Findings and Concepts

Our point of departure was to question the nature, scope, and implications of the present labor upsurge within the North America automobile industry. Drawing on the concepts of critical junctures, punctuated equilibria, and power resources, as well as transition and socio-technical perspectives, we constructed a framework to analyze and categorize the momentum in labor activities. We maintain that the current labor upsurge is part of a critical juncture that holds the potential to tip the balance of power in favor of a more equitable employment relationship. It is unfolding during an epochal-sociotechnical transition pushing the automotive industry towards a new electric mobility paradigm. At the same time, there is a transition towards the adoption of binding mechanisms for the enforcement of fundamental labor rights across international borders and supply chains. This entails transitioning from a voluntaristic corporate social responsibility approach to labor rights to a system of trans-border labor standards tied to preferential trade access and/or corporate sustainable due diligence. In North America, the labor chapter in the USMCA and its RRLM potentially represent this movement.

We provide evidence regarding the productive conditions shaping this critical juncture for an emboldened labor movement. These conditions include the industry transition towards electric vehicles and the technological struggle with China to lead the transition, the heightened need for regional cooperation that the latter entails, the tightening of the labor market generated by post-pandemic worker shortages and skills-gap, and the record profits automakers have enjoyed over the last decade whilst inflation continued to erode worker real wages. These all point to increased structural power resources for labor.

The permissive conditions for the labor resurgence include worker activism from below and the reform of labor organizations; the USMCA's labor chapter, and especially its RRLM; legal and government actions favorable to labor; an emergent and more militant unionism with an increased propensity to strike; and a pro-labor swing in public opinion. While the former conditions provide greater institutional power resources for labor, the latter point to an associational and societal power environment more conducive to labor.

We show that both sets of conditions are intertwined in recent developments in the North American auto industry and help explain the new wave of labor struggles and strikes within the sector. This was most evident in the UAW-D-3 strikes in 2023, but also present the same year in Unifor-D-3 bargaining and in the emergent unionism evolving in Mexico around cases filed through

the USMCA's RRLM. Through these struggles, organized auto workers have reversed some of the most pernicious features of the concessionary bargaining era including frozen wage-rates, suspended or eliminated cost-of-living adjustments, and tiered wage systems.

The 2023 round of auto sector collective bargaining and strikes in the US and Canada potentially signify a tipping point in contemporary labor relations in the industry. The UAW and Unifor not only won record wage increases and fringe benefits but also ensured union coverage and/or income and employment security for factory disruptions occasioned by the sociotechnical transition to electric vehicle production in the industry. Both unions seized the advantage of a more favorable structural and institutional environment to adopt a more militant stance in pursuit of their demands, especially in the case of the UAW. The UAW's shift toward a more militant bargaining position was enabled both by the success of an internal grassroots reform movement and the broader political environment. Compared to the previous Trump administration President Biden had fostered a more labor-friendly climate, as he was ever mindful of the importance of securing working-class support in the key swing states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania in the presidential election of 2024. Indeed, during the 2023 UAW strike President Biden became the first U.S. president to walk a picket line in support of a union.

Leveraging this conjuncture of political economic conditions to their advantage, both the UAW and Unifor made historic gains during 2023 bargaining. Although the outcomes, especially regarding compensation, were similar in size and scope, there was a striking difference in the performative aspects of the bargaining processes between the two unions. Whereas Unifor followed a more traditional approach in both its bargaining and communication strategies, the UAW adopted a novel bargaining strategy that involved progressively widening strikes across all three companies and the use of social media to communicate a more militant and aggressive class-based narrative to the union membership and a wider public. Going forward, the UAW is well-positioned to sustain a labor resurgence within the North American auto industry. It remains to be seen whether the UAW's recent bargaining strategy represents an historic shift that spreads to other sectors and countries, or if the strategy will remain limited to the auto industry as workers confront the EV transition and other economic challenges in the present moment.

In Mexico, the 2019 Labor Law Reform and the 2020 USMCA labor chapter produced an unusual upsurge of labor union activities. New labor institutions, the government's new policy for raising minimum wages, and a new set of processes and mechanisms to promote and enforce fundamental workers'

rights, stressing freedom of association and collective negotiations, constitute the cornerstone of labor relations developments in Mexico. In particular, the upsurge of labor activity is fueled by the top-down actions taken by North American governments within the framework of USMCA rules. In addition, a tradition of cross-border labor work has continued, including recent expressions and pledges of solidarity by Shawn Fain (UAW) and Cesar Orta (SITAUDI/Independent Union of Audi Workers in Mexico) (Bradbury 2024). USMCA provisions linking preferential market access to respect for labor rights has deterred management in firms dependent upon exports to the U.S. and Canada from violating workers' rights. In this context, labor capacities are growing in the Mexican automotive industry. Advocacy groups and activists are teaming up to support workers and encourage them to freely organize and extant independent worker organizations are relaunching organizing initiatives. Simultaneously, labor's voice has been growing in Mexico backed by the solidarity and in-field organizing support of the AFL-CIO, United Steelworkers, Unifor, DOL ILAB resources, as well as other international labor rights and social dialogue promoters. Nevertheless, most workers are not affected by the current transitions and struggles, undemocratic legacy corporatist CTM unions remain dominant, and there has been little progress made in raising auto workers contractual wages.

The labor movements in the three North American countries each bear legacies that reflect their particular path dependencies. In brief, Mexican and U.S. associational and institutional capabilities are shaped by negative legacies that eroded labor's power resources. The Canadian labor movement evolved in a more labor-friendly legal and institutional environment with greater protection of workers' rights. These distinctive conditions and labor power resources resulted in the labor upsurge following different trajectories in each country. US and Canadian autoworkers enjoy stronger associational and societal power resources than their Mexican counterparts, although the latter now appears to have more institutional backing. The UAW has less associational power than Unifor which appears to be more constrained by structural conditions.

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