

## AUTOS

# The story behind UAW Shawn Fain's 'Eat the rich' T-shirt and what it means



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UAW President Shawn Fain made an eye-popping and significant statement during his Facebook Live broadcast last Friday without saying a word. His T-shirt said it for him: EAT THE RICH.

The shirt, which instantly became the star of the show, was a surprise even to some of Fain's staff who were not aware he was going to wear it during his update on contract negotiations until he came on live, a UAW source told the Detroit Free Press. The person was not authorized to speak publicly, therefore cannot be named in this article.

The slogan, which has a history dating to the late 1700s and the French Revolution, has been widely used across pop culture in titles for songs, movies and even a book by political humorist P.J. O'Rourke, to name a few. Other labor leaders have used it at rallies and events, too. It is commonly associated with leftist politics as a rallying cry against economic inequality and a push to redistribute wealth.

Fain's shirt was a gift from a UAW member after that member saw a headline on an Oct. 5 New York Times story about Fain's disdain for billionaires that read: "New UAW chief has a nonnegotiable demand: Eat The Rich," said the UAW source.

Fain has said in the past that in his opinion, "Billionaires ... don't have a right to exist." He has also railed against the \$20 million-plus annual compensation paid to the Detroit Three CEOs compared with worker wages. Fain himself is expected to make the same amount in annual compensation as his predecessor Ray Curry, according to labor experts. Based on the 2022 LM-2 financial disclosure, Curry's base compensation that year was slightly over \$219,000. If adding in bonuses and other benefits, it showed a total compensation of \$267,000.

Some rank-and-file UAW members don't know the origin and true meaning behind the “eat the rich” slogan, they told the Detroit Free Press.

“The only thing I knew about it was 'Eat The Rich' was the Krokus" song in the '80s, said a union member, referring to a rock band, who watched the live feed on the picket line at General Motors' Lansing Delta Township Assembly plant. The person asked to not be named because they believed Fain wearing the shirt was not befitting of his office.

Still other union members said they liked Fain's choice to wear it, which was apropos, coming exactly one week after the CEOs of GM and Ford Motor Co. both lambasted Fain's strike strategy — GM CEO Mary Barra accusing Fain of "theatrics." It was a response of sorts from Fain, labor experts said.

"Was it directed to Mary Barra? Absolutely," said Harley Shaiken, a labor expert who has been following the negotiations closely, and who is a professor emeritus at University of California-Berkeley. "The shirt effectively said, 'You want theatrics? Here we come.' "

## **Automakers react to the shirt**

When asked about the shirt and its message to the Detroit Three CEOs, GM declined to comment for this article.

Back in August in a letter to employees, Mark Stewart, chief operating officer for Stellantis North America, wrote of Fain at the time, "The theatrics and personal insults will not help us reach an agreement." Stellantis also declined to comment for this article.

But Ford Chief Communications Officer Mark Truby told the Detroit Free Press in an email response to a question about Fain's T-shirt and about Farley's recent criticism of Fain's bargaining tactics, "We want all of our employees to do well. Ford is the only automaker to add rather than cut UAW jobs since 2007. We have gone well beyond the letter of the contract to reward UAW employees in the past three contracts."

Truby said Ford has made the union a "record offer" that would make "a real difference" to workers, putting them among the best compensated hourly workers in the world.

"Creating a business that delivers strong profits is a positive thing for everyone, because that leads to big profit-sharing checks and investment in jobs, innovation and growth," Truby said.

## **Merchandising of 'Eat the rich'**

On Friday, some 52,000 viewers tuned in to see Fain give an update on contract negotiations with the Detroit Three automakers. He did not expand his Stand Up Strike because the three automakers were making bargaining progress, but he said there remained gaps to be closed. Just before his live appearance, Fain said, GM agreed to include its battery plant workforce as part of the UAW's master contract, saving it from strike action at its Arlington Assembly Plant where it makes its highly profitable large SUVs.

Some watched Fain's live feed from the picket lines and some found ways to take a break inside the factory to watch with colleagues.

“A couple people exclaimed, ‘Look at that shirt, EAT THE RICH!’ We noticed it for sure,” said a UAW member who works at one of GM's factories in Flint, who is not being identified due to concerns over workplace retaliation for watching the broadcast at work. “(The shirt) was so funny.”

There are websites now selling UAW T-shirts, such as [www.redbubble.com](http://www.redbubble.com), with some well-known slogans. According to a Saturday post on X, UAW Local 2865 was selling "Eat The Rich" T-shirts for a \$50 donation made to the UAW Region 6 Hardship Fund for the first 100 donors. And, starting Monday, "Eat The Rich" T-shirts were expected to be available on [www.officialtshirtplus.com/uawlocal163](http://www.officialtshirtplus.com/uawlocal163), according to a social media post.

## **Union members' react to Fain's fashion**

As to the meaning of the saying, workers seemed to have varying interpretations. Some found it "inspiring," such as the Flint facility employee mentioned above.

Another said it was "substantial" that Fain wore it, noting most of Fain's fashion choices have been noteworthy to send a message.

"He's been on a mission with his shirts if you look at the type of shirts he's been wearing," said Tommy Wolikow, a UAW member who works at GM's Flint Assembly plant. "The red shirt that said 'End Tiers' and the gray camouflage shirts show this is serious. I think he's trying to show strength in unity."

Wolikow interprets "Eat the Rich" to mean, "we're tired of the rich eating us and now it's our turn to be able to get some of what the rich have and be able to have a better quality of life."

Fain's fashion choices are strategic, but not groundbreaking, said Art Wheaton, director of Labor Studies at Cornell University. Buttons, slogans, red T-shirts, camouflage have all been used by unions for generations, he said.

"The UAW president at Mazda Flat Rock, now a Mustang plant, wore combat boots and camouflage regularly in the 1990s. It was explicitly to show a more militant attitude by the UAW," Wheaton said. The Communication Workers of America union "uses red shirts for solidarity on specific days of the week, other unions do as well."

Likewise Christian Smalls, the leader of the Amazon Labor Union, wore the "Eat the Rich" slogan on a jacket during a 2022 visit to the White House. While most UAW members embrace the message, some didn't like Fain wearing it.

"It's not becoming of the office he has," said the union member who watched the live feed on the picket line at GM's Lansing Delta Township Assembly plant. "If he had on a button-down shirt, a polo shirt or even the camo shirt — to have that slogan on a sign is fine — I just don't think it makes him look professional or serious."

But, the person said, there was a lot of laughter about the shirt and support for its message from others on the picket line.

## **The 'most important statement' yet**

Laughter aside, the undertone of the message is serious and it could affect negotiations, said one automotive and labor expert.

"While provocative messaging may generate attention and demand for merchandise, it's essential to recognize that addressing wealth inequality requires a more comprehensive approach," said Alex Calderone, president, automotive operational and financial consultancy for the Calderone Advisory Group in Birmingham. "Engaging in productive negotiations with companies to secure fair contracts is a crucial objective. Therefore, it's worth considering whether such messaging, although attention-grabbing, might hinder the broader goal of achieving equitable agreements."

Calderone worked through negotiations with the UAW in 2008 through 2010 when he was on a financial turnaround team for the then-named Greektown Casino through bankruptcy, he said. He had to negotiate with the union representing workers at the casino and is familiar with the general negotiation process.

He said Fain's shirt might have offended some, including the automakers, but it speaks to the disproportionate damage done to lower income Americans in recent years by inflation compared with wealthier people. It is now a systemic problem

"It calls attention to an issue that by all means is the 800-pound gorilla standing in the room and at one point or the other that issue has to be addressed," Calderone said.

Fain's shirt not only grabbed the attention of union members, others were captivated by it, too. For example, Shaiken said, "I was at a dinner (Friday) night with about a half dozen Berkeley faculty and spouses, many from the law school. Everyone wanted to talk about the T-shirt and this crew all loved it. I was a bit more lukewarm."

Marick Masters, a business professor and labor expert at Wayne State University, said the shirt "really grabbed my attention" when he watched Fain's presentation.

"In some ways it is the most important statement Fain made, especially in light of what he said about the executives thinking they are superior and would never have common folks to dinner," Masters said.

Masters was referring to a soliloquy of sorts that Fain launched into on Friday taking a direct jab back at Farley and Barra saying, "The CEOs are trying to trivialize our strike and they're saying it's just theatrics," when it is about the power of working class people. He then listed how it is not "theatrics" to actually win higher wages, cost-of-living adjustments and other union demands.

Fain said the auto executives think the UAW members are dumb. "They look at me and they see some redneck from Indiana. They look at you and see someone they'd never have over for dinner or let ride on their yacht or fly on their private jet. We may be foul-mouthed, but we're strategic. We may get fired up, but we're disciplined and we may get rowdy, but we're organized."

Fain definitely wanted to respond to the CEOs with his speech on "theatrics," said the UAW source. But this source did not believe Fain wore the shirt merely to send a message to Barra and Farley. It was more to reiterate Fain's general message for a redistribution of wealth, which is a political agenda he has clearly stated, the person said.

"He chooses fashion that sticks out and has a theme," the person said.

## The origin of the slogan

The actual origin of "Eat The Rich" is blurry. According to multiple sources, including Berkeley's Shaiken, the saying is derived from a quote that has been attributed to the Enlightenment Era philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau as: "When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich."

Rousseau was known for work on the Social Contract, which questioned government's responsibility for the people. But while many attribute the saying to Rousseau, there are questions as to whether it actually appears in his writings, Shaiken said. Still, the quote appears extensively throughout 19th-century political texts.

In an email, Shaiken said that the slogan's use during the French Revolution was against the crown, aristocracy, and the wealthy so it was more anti-feudal at the time than its more modern counterculture use as anti-capitalist. But it was "positively radical just the same. Anti-capitalist uses appeared in places like the Paris Commune in the 1870s."

"The message it's meant to convey is, 'We're fed up with inequality and a lack of opportunity and the damage it does to working people, we've had it with conspicuous consumption, and we need bold, more aggressive political or labor action,' " Shaiken said.

More recently and closer to home, the Detroit-based underground tabloid Fifth Estate reflected an anarchist-libertarian philosophy during the 1970s and its editors were part of the "Eat the Rich Gang" of leftist thinkers, according to University of Michigan library.

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For now, Fain's focus is on the bargaining table, not a larger political agenda, but in the near future, a political agenda that provides more rights for workers and unions is part of Fain's vision, Shaiken said.

Then, he added, "Shawn Fain wearing the T-shirt received a lot of attention and, like-it-or-not, it was positively theatrical."

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