

Not Your Father's UAW: Facebook Live and the 2023 UAW Strike

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the 2023 UAW Strike against the “Big Three” American automobile manufacturers and the union’s use of Facebook Live (FL) as a tool for organization and mobilization. Using John Kelly’s landmark *Rethinking Industrial Relations Mobilisation, Collectivism and Long Waves* (2012), the paper provides a short history of the 2023 strike and the difficulties faced by organized labor from the 1990s-2020s. The UAWs use of Facebook Live (FL) in the strike is seen as bridging Kelly’s gap between organization and mobilization. The ubiquity of Facebook Live and livestream is seen as creating an environment in which union members can share information with each other, users can comment on aspects of the strike, and mainstream media outlets can access alternative views of the labor action. Facebook Live. Using Rainie and Wellman’s (2012) suggestion that Internet 2.0 platforms actually encourage and make it easy for users to work in virtual and real-life domains, the paper suggests that the sense of presence generated by Facebook Live helped the UAW to reach a good outcome. The use of FL in this labor action allowed for communication that helped the UAW to influence public opinion and increase membership. While recognizing that FL is not universally accepted across all users (Jung & Bhojwani 2025), the use of the platform by the UAW appears to have facilitated to some degree a settlement that was positive for the UAW.

Keywords-Communication, Labor, Livestream, Mobilization, Union

I. INTRODUCTION

On September 15, 2023, CNN reported that the United Auto Workers had called a strike against the “Big Three” American automobile manufacturer. The strike began at GM’s Wentzville Missouri, which had 3,600 UAW members on its staff; Ford’s Michigan Assembly plant in Wayne, Michigan, which will have 3,300 strikers; and Stellantis’ Toledo Assembly complex in Ohio, where 5,800 will be on strike. In a departure from previous strikes, fewer than 13,000 of the UAW’s 145,000 members walked off the job. Strikes were targeted for both visibility and to conserve the Union’s strike fund. With all three automakers reporting record or near-record profits, the union was trying to recapture many benefits they had been forced to give up more than a decade ago when the companies were cash starved and on the brink of bankruptcy. The three automakers all offered the union double-digit pay hikes but it was not enough to meet the union negotiators’ demands which included a number of non-pay initiatives.

The 2023 UAW (United Auto Workers) strike was a significant labor action against the “Big Three” U.S. automakers: General Motors (GM), Ford Motor Company, and Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler). The strike began on September 15, 2023, after negotiations over new labor contracts failed to meet the union’s demands. Those demands included substantial improvements in wages and benefits, including: a 40% wage increase over the life of the contract (a response to CEO pay growth in recent years), restoration of cost-of-living adjustments (COLA), elimination of a tiered wage system (which gave newer workers lower pay and fewer benefits than veteran employees), job security guarantees, particularly amid the transition to electric vehicles (EVs), and a 32-hour workweek with 40 hours of pay (Lichtenstein, 2024).

The strike was historic in its strategy. For the first time, the UAW adopted a “stand-up strike” approach, targeting individual plants at each of the Big Three automakers rather than striking at all facilities simultaneously. This allowed the union to escalate pressure gradually while conserving resources. Knowing that its members would not be paid during the strike, the UAW adopted this “stand-up” strategy to conserve the union’s strike fund. The strike disrupted production and strained supply chains for the automakers as it served to highlight the debate over the future of manufacturing jobs during the EV transition. The economic effects extended beyond the auto industry, impacting suppliers, local economies, and, potentially, vehicle prices. Yet,

unlike other major strikes, public sentiment was on the side of the union and President Biden, sensing that the State of Michigan was up-for-grabs in the upcoming Presidential election, joined the strikers on the picket line (Maccarrone, 2024).

After weeks of negotiation, agreements were reached in late October 2023. The new contracts included: (1) wage increases of approximately 25% over 4.5 years, (2) restoration of COLA in certain terms; and (3) significant progress toward eliminating tiered pay structures. Additionally, significant commitments from automakers to invest in U.S. facilities, ensuring job security during the EV transition, were promised (Lichtenstein, 2024).

The strike was emblematic of a broader wave of labor activism in 2023, fueled by inflation, rising corporate profits, and growing worker dissatisfaction. There were labor actions by screen and television writers, Starbucks employees, and Amazon workers, among others. It also underscored tensions between unions and companies as industries adapted to technological shifts, such as the adoption of EVs in the case of the UAW strike or with Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the case of the Hollywood Screenwriters strike earlier that same year.

A major tactic used by the UAW involved Facebook Live (FL). Union President Shawn Fain used FL to solicit input from auto workers on demands, to call these “stand-up” strikes, and to gauge how members felt about the negotiations and the series of offers made by the automobile manufacturers during the strike. This article will briefly explore how the union used FL and will suggest why the platform itself may have served as a major contributor to a good outcome for the UAW. The paper will argue that, more than simply providing a conduit for the dissemination of information, it allowed for union organization and strike mobilization to occur more-or-less simultaneously, and, just as important, to shift public sentiment toward the UAW. According to Kelly’s (2012) landmark text on unions and other social movements, organization and mobilization have long been seen as rather arduous, time-consuming, but ultimately separate tasks but, perhaps the use of Internet 2.0 platforms such as FL with its sense of immediacy, can allow both to be more-or-less carried out together. Platforms such as Facebook Live may allow organizers to build on the progress of the union movement in recent years and to gain public support for organized labor. (Whalen, 2023).

II. THE LABOR MOVEMENT, 2000 AND BEYOND

By 2011 fewer than seven percent of employees in the private sector belonged to unions. The UAW’s numbers of automobile union members were representative of these trends in the manufacturing sector: 1,619,000 active members in 1970, 1,446,000 in 1980, 952,000 in 1990, 623,000 in 2004, and 377,000 in 2010 (with far more retired than active members). Also, other private sector unions saw similar trends. For example, by 2014, coal mining in the United States had largely shifted to open-pit mines in Wyoming, and there were only 60,000 active coal miners, with only 35,000 union members. By comparison, the United Mine Workers boasted 800,000 members in the late 1930s. Certainly, there is a decreased need for coal in the 2020s but, these decreases in membership are nevertheless alarming.

Kerrissey & Schofer (2013) noted that less educated workers were less likely to join labor unions even as unions themselves attempted to organize workplaces that hire “unskilled” workers. Even as the research continued to indicate positive effects for union membership for these workers in pay and career advancement (Dodini et al., 2023) and health outcomes (VanHeuvelen et al., 2023), these workers seemed to be the ones least likely to join. Mindell and Reynolds (2023) suggest automation as a factor while Kim (2022) suggested that status inequality contributed to feelings of powerlessness by non-unionized workers and had a negative effect on workers’ willingness to join a labor union. Some researchers suggested that this decline in union membership could be tied in part to an “atomization” resulting from the rise of social media with younger workers eschewing union membership in industries that historically provided a home to organized labor (Mayer, 2004). In a view reminiscent of Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2001), these researchers suggested that Americans of all levels were less likely to engage in all manner of collaborative activities in real life. This argument is discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Chaison (2002) summed up the pessimism that surrounded declining union membership in the digital age when he suggested that the internet, with its power and convenience magnified by wireless communication, would reduce the relevancy of the traditional workplace-centered appeals of unions organizing. With greater physical distance and less psychological attachment to their employer and workplace, professional, clerical, technical, and sales workers would ultimately believe that collective bargaining does not fit their situations. Bryson et al. (2010) suggested, however, that, despite the gloomy outlook of other scholars, there was some promise in the ability of the Internet to reverse the decline in union membership (and, for that matter, in progressive organizing in general). They suggested, however, that unions might be losing the one lure into membership that was experienced-based rather than search-based. In other words, the ability of organized labor to demonstrate how union membership made for improvements in salary, benefits, and workplace safety might not be accomplished through the internet. They suggest that there needs to be intense interaction among workers

both on and off the job and, while the internet had not offered this as yet, they were cautiously optimistic that it might be able to do so, given the growth in the number of internet users.

The pessimism surrounding this research and scholarship, however, seems to emanate from a place of “either-or.” That is, workers faced the binary choice of either virtual interactions or more traditional face-to-face union activity and the uphill battle of competing with employers who had a head start in using social media and the internet to communicate with workers. Wang & Huang (2023) suggested that successful online organizational communication involved tightly controlled information. Ghani & Malike (2023) viewed organizational management of social media as the way to define employee “voice,” leaving employees with little opportunity to speak for themselves.

Yet, theorists such as Rainie and Wellman (2012) and Rogers (2013) suggest that a more user-centered model of social media participation was actually taking place. Zhou et al., (2021) suggest that Internet 2.0 is more than just the “internet of things,” that the internet is still essentially about communication. These theorists suggest that a clearer understanding of Internet 2.0 actually signals a way forward for users. Instead of engaging in a sort of false binary of “real-life vs. virtual life,” the new internet actually fits rather seamlessly into the lives of its users. A typical user exists in a matrix including a number of identities, some played out in real life and others on the internet. For example, a user may attend religious services or play sports in real life while engaging with members of their political party or social organization online. Rogers suggests that the typical Internet 2.0 user exists in a connection of online and offline dimensions, a phenomenon Rainie & Wellman described as “network-based”, where digital contact often supplements rather than replaces face-to-face interaction.

Indeed, by 2016, union membership began to increase in certain sectors of the economy. Amazon started to see organizing in their warehouses and 2018 brought public school teachers’ strikes to a few states. But, from 2020 forward, there was an even more significant increase in labor union action, following those years of rather moribund growth in union membership and despite legislation that did not favor the labor movement. In 2023, the labor movement in the United States saw significant momentum and development across various sectors, signaling a growing wave of worker activism and increased demands for better wages, benefits, and working conditions, culminating in the significant achievements in 2023. One of the most high-profile events was the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) strike, which lasted for months. These related strikes, driven by concerns over fair pay, residuals, and the impact of artificial intelligence on the entertainment industry, garnered widespread public support. They served in large part to address issues such as the use of AI in scriptwriting and acting and to bring these issues into public consideration. And, of course, there was the UAW strike, which is the topic of this article. In addition to the UAW and Hollywood strikes, there were also actions in the hospitality, retail, and healthcare industries. Fast-food workers, for example, pushed for higher wages and improved working conditions. In the public sector, education workers again and health workers staged strikes and demonstrations advocating for better pay and working conditions, especially in light of post-pandemic concerns and stressors (Schurcke, 2024).

All told, union membership saw a notable increase in 2023, as workers in both traditional unionized industries and new sectors both sought to join unions, even as the courts and the NLRB made union organizing more difficult. This increase was partly a result of the wave of strikes, but also because of the growing recognition of the power that collective bargaining could offer. The Biden administration, which was generally supportive of labor unions, also helped elevate labor issues.

One might ask how union membership saw such an increase in 2023, given the headwinds that union organization faced. In *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, John Kelly (2012) challenges traditional perspectives on industrial relations, especially through a focus on collective action and mobilization theory. He outlines his critique of previous approaches to industrial relations, particularly the pluralist framework, which tends to emphasize stability and cooperation between employers and employees. For Kelly, employers during the latter part of the preceding century and the early part of the new millennium were successful in using this pluralist framework to discourage labor action. First, by discouraging unionization or encouraging “silos” within the workplace, employers created and reinforced the understanding of an employee as singular and independent entity who has entered into an individual “contract” with the employer. Low pay or poor working conditions were, thus, either seen as an individual problem or a problem facing the entire company, “all of us” and, therefore, a common problem at some level to be dealt with by the organization itself acting through management or by the choices of individual workers. For Kelly, organization and mobilization depend upon workers identifying with each other rather than with the employer. The direct and collective action necessary for change involves building coalitions of workers across an industry, workers who see more in common with each other than with their employer. This creation of coalitions is, of course, something that takes time to achieve. Some unions took to the internet to organize but, as Hodder and Houghton (2019) suggest, unions were “late to the game” and failed to understand the power of and how to use Internet 2.0.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE WORKPLACE

Many companies use social media platforms to connect with their employees, enhance internal communication, and foster engagement. These companies often use both public social networks (like LinkedIn, Twitter, or Facebook) and private platforms (such as Slack, Yammer, or something built on a Local Area Network) to create a more connected, engaged, and transparent work environment and customer base. For example, Salesforce uses Chatter, an enterprise social network that enables employees to share updates, collaborate, and connect through conversations about ongoing projects. Zappos uses Facebook and X to connect with employees in addition to using internal tools like Slack. (Stray, et al, 2019). Zappos claims that these platforms build a work culture based on transparency. They use social media to maintain a direct line of communication between the leadership and employees, fostering a sense of community. with different channels dedicated to specific teams or interests.

Yet, examples such as these are managed by administrators within the company and are all used by smaller companies that do not allow their employees the use of collective bargaining. Indeed, the ability of workers to organize themselves on social media and on company e-mail systems has been limited by recent decisions of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and employees who use these tools to organize in the workplace are always subject to possible employer discovery and retaliation. Garcia (2020) argues that new technologies are needed to build collective action and solidarity among workers but also to provide a conduit to government agencies to make complaints and provide anonymous information. He notes that private companies, government agencies, and labor unions have all developed technology tools to meet their needs. Garcia argues that the challenge for the development of the next generation of workplace apps will involve: (1) requiring the employer to distribute these apps to their employees without the employer exerting control over them; (2) assuring the employees that the apps provide a space for candid exchange of information free from surveillance and retaliation; (3) providing unions the ability to access these "digital spaces" even as the courts and the NLRB have made access to physical spaces increasingly difficult; and (4) providing a store of data for government agencies to enforce workplace law statutes, while at the same time maintaining employee privacy for sensitive information.

All of the above is valuable information for the next generation of workplace apps and seems to suggest the development of a less adversarial relationship between labor and management in various industries. Yet, present trends seem to suggest that, even as labor makes significant gains in membership, the courts and NLRB have made future gains far more difficult. Indeed, a rather useful review of the literature by Lindell and Crevani (2022) makes no mention of any workplace uses of social media that are not generated and initiated by employers. It is fair to say that the vast majority of research into social media in the workplace view "employee voice" as something to be regulated. This present article suggests, however, that the use of an already existing platform assisted the UAW in a successful outcome to the 2023 strike. Facebook Live was, of course, available to both Big Three management as well as to union members but, it was the workers who made the most effective use of the platform.

IV. FACEBOOK LIVE

Developed in 2015 for "celebrities," Facebook Live is a livestreaming platform. Streams appeared and users were able to comment in real time. Over 2016 and 2017, the feature was made available to all users (Garun, 2017). Streaming could be delivered on Facebook Live to an audience that could weigh in on what was being streamed as it was being streamed in real time. Users could view live events and comment in real time or after the fact to a recording of the event.

The benefits of the UAW using Facebook Live were several. First, Facebook Live offered union members and supporters to broadcast events and updates from the front lines of the strike in real-time. This gave the public a raw, unfiltered view of the situation, beyond what traditional media might report. For example, workers could show live footage of picket lines, rallies, and even negotiations. This allowed the broader public to witness the emotions, struggles, and solidarity of the workers firsthand (Jung & Bhojwani, 2024).

Facebook Live enabled union leaders and rank-and-file workers to communicate directly with the public, without the mediation of mainstream media. In interviews, speeches, and Q&A sessions, they could share their concerns, goals, and the importance of the strike, fostering a sense of connection with the wider community. This also allowed them to debunk misinformation and provide counter-narratives to the often corporate-driven portrayal of labor disputes (Lievrouw, 2023).

Facebook Live attempted to do what Kelly (2012) suggested by bridging the gap between the work of organizing and the work of mobilizing. Through the livestreams, the UAW was able to organize rallies and other actions by broadcasting them on Facebook, encouraging people to join in person or show solidarity online. The social media platform also provided a space for workers to coordinate with one another, share resources, and organize picket line shifts, giving the movement a more decentralized but still connected form of organization.

The use of Facebook Live was also a tool that traditional media outlets increasingly turned to for on-the-ground reporting. Journalists could share live footage from the picket lines or interviews with workers, providing an alternative perspective to corporate narratives. This helped in making the strike not just a local or national issue but a global story covered by news outlets that typically might not focus as deeply on labor disputes. The very availability of Facebook Live streams provided traditional media outlets with ready-made coverage they might not draw from.

Corporate interests often use media to frame labor strikes negatively—sometimes portraying striking workers as unreasonable or misinformed. Facebook Live and other social media platforms gave workers a direct way to present their case to the public, creating a counter-narrative that challenged corporate messaging. One of the most powerful aspects of using Facebook Live was the ability to humanize the workers involved in the strike. By capturing the personal stories of union members, their families, and their experiences, social media helped show the human side of the labor struggle. Workers could speak about how they were struggling to make ends meet despite working for multi-billion-dollar companies, challenging the narrative that they were just “asking for too much.” (Pottenger, 2024).

Finally, the reach of Facebook Live is such that the audience is international. As UAW members went on strike, Facebook Live helped build global solidarity by connecting workers across different industries and countries. International labor movements were able to show support, and some union leaders from other countries broadcast their messages of solidarity, highlighting the global nature of labor struggles. This also helped the workers involved in the strike feel that they were not alone and that their struggle was part of a larger movement for workers' rights worldwide. (Walker, 2025).

One must ask, however, whether these positive effects would have been true with other streaming platforms. Would the benefits the UAW experienced have been similar with any platform that allowed streaming and responding? Lum and Chang (2023) found that the media characteristics of Facebook Live significantly influence the sense of presence, emotion, and cognition act as intermediates between Facebook Live's media characteristics and user engagement behaviors. This sense of social presence was found to be reinforcing for the user. satisfaction is higher when users feel part of a live experience rather than a passive viewer. Thus, allowing users to watch strike actions and hear speeches by union officials at rallies along with the ability to comment and interact with other users made Facebook Live a good choice for the UAW. It seems that the features of FL made it a fortuitous choice for a large union during a strike with national and even international implications. Admittedly, FL has not been universally embraced with some users. Zelenkauskaitė and Loring-Albright (2023) suggest that livestreaming is still very much under negotiation with some users. Jung and Bhojwani (2025) found that FL does not automatically lead to user / viewer involvement.

V. CONCLUSION

As the UAW plans for a “southern offensive” in which the union will attempt to organize Toyota and work with the newly-formed UAW organization at Volkswagen in the Southern US, it will be interesting to see the tactics employed (Lichtenstein, 2025; Walker, 2025). Minchin (2025) recounts the long struggle to organize Volkswagen in Tennessee and notes that, even after successfully organizing, unions in the southern US face challenges that their northern counterparts often do not, even after they are organized. Anti-union sentiment persists in the American South. After the success of 2023, the UAW faces significant headwinds in the region.

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