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USA

# Labor Beyond Borders

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**“TARIFF” MAY BE Trump’s the most delightful word in the English language, but for workers, it represents a danger. It’s like accepting a two-tier wage structure to keep one’s job. Been there, done that. Photo: Like autoworkers, Starbucks baristas work for the same corporation across borders. Why not organize across them as well?**

When Shawn Fain [president of the United Auto Workers (UAW)] supported Trump’s auto tariffs, he made the mistake of thinking that a narcissistic businessman could develop a policy in workers’ interests. For Trump, tariffs are a weapon used to bludgeon workers in other countries.

Recall that when Fain went to Germany and asked its powerful union, IG Metall, for help in organizing Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz workers, the union responded positively. The unity of workers across borders, especially when they work for the same corporation, is an extremely valuable tool, one that inspires reciprocal solidarity.

If we look at the North American auto industry, Trump’s tariffs may cause the Big Three to move some of their jobs to the United States, but whether they will be union jobs is uncertain.

A quarter-century ago, Big Three’s commitment to Canadian production declined. Out of the nine plants they built, four have since closed, one has no product and another lost a shift. Yet U.S. assembly plants still need parts produced in Canada, and a few assembly plants remain. [\[1\]](#)

While Canadian and U.S. autoworkers have parity in wages and benefits, the average U.S. worker makes about eight times more than the Mexican autoworker. When the USMCA replaced NAFTA in 2020, it established labor courts to set up a rapid response mechanism for complaints against employers and demanded that workers vote on all their contracts.

However, these were unsuccessful in aiding Mexican autoworkers who had no union or a totally corrupt one. The Independent Mexico Labor Expert Board set up under the USMCA has since concluded that given the level of intimidation, these reforms were not enough to provide the climate for workers to choose independent unions and win higher wages.

The report recommended a continental wage floor throughout the industry. In response, the UAW has called for a tri-national labor council to set up a minimum wage. It’s unclear how that could work given the UAW’s position in support of auto tariffs, but the idea of cross border organizing offers possibilities for a more equitable outcome.

In a recent Labor Notes article [\[2\]](#), Natascha Elena Uhlmann mentions that Mexican unions have raised the idea of a \$16 an hour minimum to be phased in over five years. That does not seem ambitious enough! Why a minimum wage instead of a “living wage”? What about a built-in cost of living increase? Why not parity?

Further, if a tri-national council worked out a continent-wide wage agreement, why stop there?

Source: May-June 2026, [ATC 242](#).

PS:

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[1] "[Canadian Auto Isn't in 'Crisis,' It's in Danger of Extinction](#)," Sam Gindin, *The Bullet*, 11/12/25. "[Trump is Tearing Apart the North American Auto Industry](#)," Taylor Noakes, *Jacobin*, 2/10/26.

[2] See "[We Can't Bridge the U.S.-Mexico Wage Gap Without Supporting Organizing in Mexico](#)," Natascha Elena Uhlmann, *Labor Notes*, 11/25.