

“The rank and file needs to have a say”: Chicago Ford workers support Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president

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For more information on the campaign of Will Lehman, visit WillForUAWPresident.org

The campaign of 34-year-old Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman for United Auto Workers (UAW) International president continues to win support throughout the US and internationally. Ford autoworkers at the Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP) spoke out in support of Lehman’s program to abolish the UAW bureaucracy and to fight for what rank-and-file workers need, including significant wage increases, cost-of-living wage gains to offset skyrocketing inflation, an end to the tier system, safety and much more.

“Workers should have more say-so in the contract process, better medical benefits,” a second-tier Chicago Ford worker said. “I support what Will is fighting for. The two-tier system should definitely be removed,” he said. “A lot of us had to wait years for a pay raise and that isn’t right.”

“The corruption with the union also shows they’re not for us,” the worker added, remarking on the UAW corruption scandal and the enrichment of the union apparatus. “We’re being treated unfairly by the union and the company. Now a bunch of them are in jail. They take our dues and don’t do anything for us.”

A number of UAW officials have been caught stealing dues money from workers and taking bribes to enforce pro-management contracts. Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, two former UAW presidents, were convicted of embezzlement of union funds and sent to prison.

“We deserve a lot more pay as well. Inflation has doubled what I pay for a lot of things now,” the worker continued. “I pay over \$90 every time I go to the pump

to fill up my tank.” Gas costs in the Chicago area crossed over \$6 a gallon on average this summer, eating into the paycheck of many workers who travel far distances to get to the plant and back home.

“We deserve \$40 an hour to work here,” Tina said, without skipping a beat when asked what she’s looking to fight for in the 2023 contract battle against Ford and the Big Three automakers. “I’ve been here 10 years and the gas and cost of living is out of control. I want more transparency in our contract process too. We really didn’t have that the last few contracts. We also get the lowest profit-sharing of all the Big Three. If he’s fighting for us, I’ll look into his campaign,” she said about Will’s campaign.

“I’ve been here since 2018,” said Deon. “Sometimes you wonder if the union officials in the executive positions are really looking out for us. Seems like they’re only taking from us. We make the plant go. Simple things like how hot it is in there on a 100-degree day this summer or getting water, don’t really get addressed either. There’s no air conditioning. I’ve only been here a short while and I listen to what the old timers say and it’s definitely not a good mark on the union that they have people in jail. They got away with our dues money is what I hear and we need to know what’s going on.”

When hearing about the main demands of Lehman’s campaign, Deon said, “I agree with Will, the rank and file need to have a say in what we’re fighting for.”

“I’ve worked here for five years,” said Jerry. “We do a lot of work here and we’re very underpaid. We should have at least \$5 more per hour. That’s fair. I drive a truck and I pay \$140 to fill my tank now. It’s a big difference from last year when I paid half that.”

He went on to say, “I work in a factory that can be very dirty, so they should at least compensate us well.” Workers at CAP have complained of a main plant in near total disrepair and filthy conditions including leaky roofs, a broken escalator, rats, dirty conditions and more. They have also denounced unsafe conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which took the life of 32-year-old Caleb Dye during the Omicron surge.

“I’m hoping for a much better contract next year. I definitely support what Will is saying if he wants us to have rank-and-file control over the contract process... Yes, I fully agree with that. I hope he wins and I’d like to learn more,” Jerry added, nodding in agreement.

“The biggest issue for me is pay,” Collie said. “We don’t get paid right. We have to wait a long time for bonuses. I had to wait months before I got a raise. I’ve worked here for three-and-a-half years. Inflation and the pandemic has affected [me] very negatively and I have to pay over \$100–\$120 right now. The cost of living has gone up and they haven’t changed our pay.

“I make \$23.70 an hour and I should make at least \$29–\$30 an hour,” Collie continued. “Based on what they’ve taken away from us, with the company profits, I feel like we don’t see a piece of it. We deserve better benefits, raises, pay and cost of living in the next contract. We should definitely have full control over our finances and our dues money. I would support Will’s campaign. I’ll vote for him.”

WSWS reporters contrasted the nationalist orientation of the UAW, which pits workers who work for the same company in one country against workers in other countries for the lowest wages, to Will Lehman’s campaign, which seeks to unite workers in all countries in a common fight to defend jobs and living standards.

Ford workers in Tamil Nadu, India and Saarlouis, Germany, are involved in a bitter fight against plant closures which are part of Ford’s “Global Redesign” restructuring plan. At the same time, Ford and the other global automakers, with the help of the UAW and other pro-company unions, are pushing to establish an even lower-paid temporary workforce at their electric vehicle and battery plants in the US and around the world.

Another worker at CAP who went by “D” spoke about his experiences with the UAW and what he wanted to see. “Something has to change. I just see people in the union who just sit back, relax and want to enjoy the ride. It’s no different than what I see with

Illinois politicians. It’s the same thing that they do with politics everywhere. They’ll give away little trinkets and that sort of thing. The truth of the matter is, can you change the system that’s run by the same people that pay your paycheck?

“I had to educate myself on the unions when I first started working here 10 years ago because I heard about the corruption that unions get into from previous jobs and how they sold workers at other companies out. When I started working here I got to see how that really worked. People from the union come up every now and then and shower us with all these accolades and then we never see them again. But then when it’s time to vote, they act like they care again.

“It’s not like it was when unions first started. When they first formed, they stuck together. Now it’s a bunch of people who just want money. They don’t really care about anybody, and when I say anybody, I mean the workers. They don’t care that what they’re doing is affecting our families.”

D spoke to the difficult situations faced by workers in the plant that the UAW turns a blind eye to. “You could have a two-income household and if one of those incomes is shaken, there’s another income to step up. But you don’t have that in here all the time. There are a lot of single mothers and single fathers with children.

“I’m all for anyone who is actually for the workers themselves, it doesn’t matter if they’re a socialist or their color or creed,” he said about Will’s identification as a socialist. “I just want somebody who has an understanding and similar perspective to mine.”

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