“All temps, once they reach 90 days, should be rolled over”: Support for Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president at Warren Truck in Detroit

Our reporters
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A team for Will Lehman’s campaign for United Auto Workers president generated great interest during a shift change at Stellantis’ Warren Truck Assembly Plant on Thursday. Lehman, a 34 year-old worker at Mack Trucks from Macungie, Pennsylvania, is running on a platform to abolish the UAW bureaucracy and establish rank-and-file control.

Campaigners used a bullhorn to facilitate a discussion of rank-and-file demands. When the team raised the demand to end forced overtime, workers shouted with approval and responded by raising demands of their own. Others posed for photographs with placards to support Will’s campaign.

Warren Truck workers responded particularly enthusiastically to calls for the abolition of the tier system, a demand that received support from both old and new workers. This system, in which workers are spread across multiple levels with different pay for the same work, was first implemented during the 2009 bailout of the auto industry. In exchange for the UAW’s support for this deal, which effectively cut wages for new hires in half, the Obama administration handed the union billions in corporate stock. This was a massive expansion of the corrupt corporatist relations which the UAW had cultivated for decades.

As a result, the auto workforce is lower-paid, younger and angrier than in years past. Many, particularly at the bottom tiers, want to fight because they feel they have nothing to lose. At Warren Truck, management has flooded the plant with low-paid temporary part-time (TPT) workers over the course of the pandemic in a desperate bid to maintain production in spite of the ongoing labor shortage. These workers are being immediately thrown into brutal work schedules which often span 16 hours a day and 7 days a week.

Turnover is extremely high, and it is not uncommon for TPTs to quit almost immediately after getting the job. Those who stick it out are strung out on promises by management that they will eventually be rolled over to full-time status.

One worker, who asked not to be named, told the campaign team, “I’m a TPT. I’ve been here more than a year. I received an email to get rolled over, but then they pushed it back. I haven’t heard from them since. And they can change your schedule whenever they want. There’s no structure to it.

“It’s a roller coaster. They have to shut down a lot because of a lack of parts. I didn’t expect it to be like this. It’s worse than I thought. And then, literally we just got forced to work overtime yesterday. I didn’t think they could do that on such short notice. But we’re on 12 hours for the next couple of days. So they change the schedule, just like that.”

A campaigner asked how many hours a temporary part-time worker typically works in a given week at Warren Truck. “50 hours, minimum,” he replied. “When I first started out it was like 60, 70 hours a week. The TPT’s are getting stiffed pretty hard, I would say. And they pretty much say we have to roll with the punches or find somewhere else to work. You speak to management about the system and how it’s being conducted, you get no results.

“The union stewards, they say they don’t know much, or they say, we’ll get back to you. They tell us

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the new contract will be better, but you still have to wait for that. In the meantime, we get sent around in circles and don't get any answers."

It sounds like things are pretty much at the breaking point, the campaigner responded. "Yeah. I was just thinking about it the other day. I'm having to train people on the job as a TPT. I'm not supposed to. But then people come in, they show you what the job is and just walk away. And then you're left there, struggling to figure out this job by yourself. I think that's why so many new people are quitting. It's bad right now."

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