

“We should be getting paid enough to live”: Ford workers throughout the Midwest support Will Lehman for UAW president

Tim Rivers
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To find out more about Lehman’s campaign, visit WillforUAWpresident.org.

Supporters for Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president spoke to workers at shift changes throughout the Midwest over the weekend, including at the Chicago Assembly Plant, Dearborn Truck Plant and Michigan Assembly Plant in Wayne, Michigan.

Lehman’s campaign has already become popular in Chicago and Dearborn, but Saturday was the first stop at the Ford plant in Wayne, which produces the popular Bronco and Ranger truck. Workers stopped to discuss Lehman’s call for a rank-and-file rebellion against the UAW apparatus.

Last Thursday, one thousand workers at the Ventra parts plant in Evart, Michigan, which makes trim parts for the Bronco and the Ranger, voted for strike action by 98 percent. The UAW has refused to call a strike, instead allowing the company to impose forced overtime seven days a week in grueling heat as a means of stock-piling parts.

To make matters worse, there is an outbreak of COVID-19 in the plant. A member of the Ventra Rank-and-File Committee at the plant reported three confirmed cases to the WSWS within the last week. On top of that, two workers were evacuated on EMS stretchers in just the last few days. One suffered kidney failure from drinking too much water, and the other suffered heat stroke. Still the company, backed by the UAW, refuses to allow heat breaks.

At the massive Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn Michigan, where a new electric vehicle building is nearing completion, Shadaisha said, “The union hasn’t done anything for us. Why not put rank-and-file workers in power?”

At the same shift change, Kwame wanted to know more about Lehman’s stand against war. “I support that,” he said. “We need to unite with workers in other countries to stop the war. We can’t do it just here. The trucks have parts from all over the world. We have to join forces all over too.”

A worker with ten years seniority said, “We need to reinstate pensions. I started here in 2007, got laid off in 2008, came back in 2010 as full-time, but with no pension.” The Obama administration in 2009 restructured the auto industry with the help of the UAW, destroying workers’ pensions and cutting wages in half for new hires.

“Inflation is terrible,” he added. “Gasoline, food, it’s having an effect on everybody. It’s important we have COLA restored too. When I was first hired in, you were guaranteed at least a dollar an hour. Now it’s just \$1,500 once a year, which is nothing, especially after taxes.

“I don’t agree with any of the tiers either. It should be a short apprenticeship. The whole ‘in-progression’ is BS. No other trades do that. I’ve talked to people who have been working here two years just to go from temporary to full time.”

A Chicago Assembly Plant worker said: “I can speak on the inflation. I’ve been working as much as I can, seven days a week, to get out of the hole during COVID. At the same time with the inflation it’s made it even harder to climb out.

“I started at \$15 and some change. Now I’m making about \$30. The pay was OK, but with the housing market as it is, it’s not enough. I was ready to buy a house, but the housing market... You’re getting squeezed everywhere. They’re taking a third of my

check off the top. Even the 401(k) just took a huge hit, so everybody's getting squeezed. The little bit of money that was gained in the last contract, that's basically it, but there's no job security or a pension in the end. So retirement's seeming to be farther and farther away."

When asked what he thought was necessary for workers to live comfortably today, he said, "\$40 an hour is more fair. I was talking to a coworker who started 12 years ago. He was saying if he doesn't get \$40/hr out of this upcoming contract, he's looking for employment elsewhere. I think definitely \$40 would be closer.

"You shouldn't have to put in 70 hours a week. When I was a kid, \$32 was good money. You could retire on it and buy a house. But that's nothing now."

When asked what he thought of Lehman's campaign demands, he said, "I'm all for Will's campaign. I think everybody I know would be all for it. He can count on my endorsement."

A temporary worker at Michigan Assembly in Wayne said, "We need to strike if they don't pay us more. We can't live like this, working full time and not being able to pay the bills.

"It costs \$1,900 a month just to rent an apartment. That's ridiculous. I have to put down \$4,000. Nobody I know can pay that.

"I'm a mother, so I can only imagine how bad it is for so many people, how nervous they're getting. It's to the point where I see people begging for money on the off-ramps, and I think 'that might be a decent side hustle for me.' That's crazy.'

"Some of us have to work in areas where we breathe in chemicals and things like that," added her friend, who is also a TPT (temporary-part-time) worker. "We know it can't be good for us. Who knows what it's doing to us? The least they could do is pay us more than \$13 an hour. But it just kind of feels like we're out here on our own.

"It's getting to the point where all I can do is pay rent and go to work. Everything else is too expensive, and even rent is getting tough. But I mean we should be getting paid enough to live. We're not asking for a crazy increase or something. But you can't really live on \$13 an hour.'

His co-worker added, "I'm interested to hear about Will's campaign. I'm still in my first 90 days, but I

don't really see anybody from the UAW coming around the plant to check on us or anything. I wouldn't know who our delegates are or anything like that. There's definitely no discussion from them about fighting better conditions, cost of living, things like that. But I agree that there should be a fight for what we need. If that's what his campaign is about, I'm interested.

"We definitely don't get paid enough right now. I think a lot of us feel that way."

Another worker added, "Will sounds interesting. We deserve COLA increases, safer working conditions. I don't think there should be tiers either. I know we're promised better pay and all that, but I haven't seen anything yet. Rising costs are crazy, can't keep up with gas and food costs at this rate. I'm not hearing anything from the union yet. I am very glad to hear about Will's campaign."

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