

“Our brothers and sisters are being worked to death”: UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman backs Ventra Evart workers’ fight against sweatshop conditions

Our reporters

18 July 2022

Work at Ventra or Flex-N-Gate? Fill out the form at the end and tell us what you think workers should be fighting for, and what conditions are like at your workplace.

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

Will Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and candidate for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), has issued a call for UAW members and other workers to rally behind the Ventra auto parts workers in Evart, Michigan, who are waging a critical fight against sweatshop conditions and poverty wages.

On June 27, workers at the Evart plant voted by 683 to 40 (95 percent) to defeat a UAW-backed contract, which would have raised wages by only \$2.50 an hour over the life of the five-year contract. It also would have imposed higher health care costs on workers who currently make between \$16 and \$17 an hour.

The UAW has refused to call a walkout despite a 98 percent vote by workers last week to authorize strike action. This has allowed management to hire new workers and impose mandatory overtime to stockpile plastic moldings and other parts in case of a strike.

Workers are being exposed to great dangers, with workers reporting a COVID-19 outbreak at the factory and medical emergencies over the weekend due to extreme heat and exhausting schedules.

“Ventra workers have every right to take action to end these terrible sweatshop conditions and protect their lives,” Lehman said Monday.

“Our brothers and sisters at Ventra are being worked to death to fill the company’s orders to automakers and

maintain Ventra’s profits.

“The infection of workers from COVID-19 is totally unacceptable! This disease has already killed more than 1 million people in the US and thousands of workers because the companies and union bureaucrats think profit is more important than our lives.”

On Sunday, a Ventra worker had to be taken out of the plant on a stretcher because of a case of heatstroke. He was the second worker in a week taken to the hospital because of heat-related medical problems.

“I fully support the call by the Ventra Workers Rank-and-File Committee for the setting of an immediate strike date,” Lehman added. “UAW officials may think the near-unanimous strike vote was a purely symbolic gesture, but workers are completely serious.

“I call on all UAW members and all workers throughout the country and internationally to support these courageous workers in the fight to end poverty wages, protect their livelihoods against inflation and end sweatshop conditions that are literally threatening their lives.”

There is widespread anger in the plant over the UAW’s refusal to sanction a strike. In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a Ventra worker and leading member of the rank-and-file committee said, “COVID has hit the shop again. It started last Tuesday. There are two lines on my side of the building with people who have tested positive. They are working us seven days a week until the strike. Everybody is exhausted. Two people just took a full point and walked out. They’re working us to death to beat the strike and the UAW is allowing it.

“Workers are going down with COVID like dominoes. It does not stay contained within the shop. We are in the breakroom together and the lunchroom together. Nothing is done to prevent the spread.”

“Most of the plant worked 66 hours last week. The union is helping the company to prepare for a strike,” the worker said. “The company purchased another warehouse in Evart to stockpile parts. They don’t have the money to give us a livable wage, but they have it to get a new warehouse.”

The worker continued, “Why are we waiting after the strike vote? The UAW officials we talk to at those strike vote meetings we have never seen before. They were not answering anything. They never introduced themselves. We don’t even know who they were.

“I support Will Lehman because he wants to put the power back in the hands of workers. Everyone agrees that’s what we need to do. This situation is going to come to a head, especially with COVID hitting our shop. There is already a lot of mumbling and grumbling among the troops. Even after the second person collapsed from heatstroke, they still did not give us any heat breaks. Two people on my side of the building have collapsed in the last week, but all they care about is production.

“If we don’t stand up, they will work us all to death. We’ve got 63 facilities. That means power. The UAW is just tying our hands behind our backs. If the people we are paying are not protecting us, then we have to do something on our own. Nothing is going to change worldwide if we don’t set the precedent right here. If you guys [the WSWs] had not gotten involved, there would be no hope for us. Most workers here have no alternative. They are stuck in the same job for years and years, and the UAW has them over a barrel.”

With the assistance of the WSWs, workers at the factory established the Ventra Workers Rank-and-File Committee earlier this month. In a statement issued ahead of last week’s strike vote, the committee said, “We know that a strike is serious business and is not something to take lightly. But we will never get what we need and what we deserve without a struggle. The eight-hour day, COLA, company-provided health care, pensions: our grandparents and great-grandparents had to fight for these things tooth and nail. The corporations and the UAW have been taking these gains back, one by one, for decades. Where will it end if we don’t take

a stand?”

The committee outlined its demands, including:

- Major wage increases and COLA to make up for surging prices and years of stagnating pay!

Lower health and dental costs, not higher ones!

No more being jerked around on forced overtime! We need predictable schedules that allow us to spend time with our families!

Adequate and regular heat breaks during the summer!

Workers’ control over line speed and safety!

To fight for this, the committee urged workers at Ventra and Flex-N-Gate (which owns Ventra) plants and the Big Three automakers to come to their aid. This includes calling on GM, Ford and Stellantis/Chrysler not to handle any scab parts in the event of a strike.

The committee also demanded that a deadline for a walkout be set without further delay, and preparations be made now for a strike. At the same time, the committee call for an end to backroom discussions between the UAW and management with all talks livestreamed and workers’ oversight of contract talks and balloting.

To sustain workers for a serious battle, the committee also called for full income for strikers from the \$800 million UAW strike fund. “The strike fund was built up with our money and must be used to support our fight and those of other workers, not as a slush fund for the UAW apparatus,” the committee declared.

The strike vote at Ventra is part of a growing mood of rebellion in the auto plants industry, which has found expression in an increasing number of decisive rejections of UAW-backed contracts.

To contact the Ventra Evart Workers Rank-and-File Committee and discuss getting involved, text 231-335-7049 or email ventrarfc@gmail.com.

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



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact