

Former GM worker: “UAW retirees have a chance to vote this year, and they should vote for Will Lehman”

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

For the first time in more than 70 years, active and retired members of the United Auto Workers union will be able to vote for the UAW president this October and November.

Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman is running for UAW president based on a program to transfer power to the rank and file, abolish the corrupt UAW bureaucracy, and unify workers to fight for a vast improvement in their living standards and working conditions.

Lyle Roussey, 81, retired from General Motors Saginaw Metal Casting plant in Michigan in 2009. He worked for the Detroit-based automaker for 25 years. He was one of the tens of thousands of “GM Gypsies” who were forced to move from factory to factory due to mass layoffs and plant closures in the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s. In addition to the Saginaw casting plant, Lyle worked at Fleetwood Fisher Body in Detroit (closed 1987), Buick City in Flint (closed 1999) and Willow Run Assembly in Ypsilanti (closed 2010).

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Lyle explained why he was supporting Will Lehman’s campaign and why UAW members, including 581,000 retired workers, should support and vote for him.

“I am all for Will Lehman, and he will get my vote. More rank-and-file workers are ready for change, and there won’t be any if you just replace one bureaucrat with another. Will gives workers hope that we can fight. Retirees remember when strikes and rebellions were effective. They also witnessed the UAW capitulate over the years. Young workers are ready to fight too. They’ve been brought in at lower wages and under this terrible tier system that the UAW agreed to.

“In appealing to workers and retirees to vote for Will, I am appealing to their intelligence. The older workers lived through the destruction of the UAW. Unless their fathers or grandfathers told them, the young workers know very little about the earlier struggles. We lived through it. But the UAW destroyed our power to strike. Workers used to walk out and stay out and fight until we got results. When I retired, I had a decent pension, hospitalization and medical insurance. We won that when the union was a union. Today, the young workers have 401(K)s and don’t make enough money to put into them.

“Retirees and older workers must stand up for the younger ones. They can’t say, ‘I’m on board and I’m pulling up the ladder.’ They have to have feelings for the young workers and stand up with them to fight not just the companies but the UAW bureaucracy. They should vote for Will, a socialist who is going to give power to the rank-and-file.

“My generation went through a lot. I worked for GM and saw the capitulation of the union. GM closed one plant after another, and the UAW didn’t do anything to fight it. Instead, it went right along with the company. I was one of the ‘GM Gypsies.’ I worked at Fleetwood, Willow Run and Buick City, and they all closed. I retired from the Saginaw Metal Casting Plant before they were able to close that one. It is the only plant I worked at that is still operating.

“GM moved production to Mexico, Brazil, China and other countries to get cheaper labor. Instead of fighting to stop the plant closings, the UAW just went along with it. They led us down the wrong path and right over the cliff. In the 1980s, they were telling us our enemies were the workers in Japan and other countries, not the companies. They were nationalist and never talked about workers in

other countries and the struggles they were in. It was like the UAW was afraid working people would get together around the world.

“Will is saying that workers are one big group, everywhere in the world, and that our struggles are the same. If workers organized a strike against GM across the globe, we would have the company by the balls. Now, if you strike in one country they laugh and move production to another. It’s a hard fight, but if we got together internationally, they wouldn’t be able to do that and undermine our strikes. Today, we have the internet and other tools to communicate with GM, Chrysler and other workers in Mexico, China and other countries. We can see we have common problems and a common fight.

“Rising gas prices and inflation are worldwide issues. No matter what country you’re from or what language you speak or religion you are, workers have the same desires. We’re not trying to get rich. We want to have dignity, decent wages and a secure retirement. It’s not a national thing, it’s international. We all want peace in the world. Whether you’re from Russia, Ukraine, the UK or the Arab countries, we all want to feed our families and not have to live on the streets or in a hut with tin over our heads.

“Before I got a job at GM I worked for Detroit Edison (now DTE). In 1972, we had a big strike, and I was in the local union leadership. We organized big pickets at the Trenton, Michigan power plant and even had a boat on the Detroit River to prevent the company from sending in managers and scabs to keep it running. Because of that we forced the company to give us concessions. The only way you can win is to stop them from making money.

“Many of my generation know that the early struggles to establish the UAW were led by socialists. Guys in their 70s and 80s were exposed to the Flint sit-down strike and other labor battles. When I was at Buick City, I was working a mile away from the plant in Flint, which workers took over in 1936. They fought government troops, and their wives and workers from all over came to defend them. That was the only way we won decent wages and pensions.

“When the union stopped fighting, we lost our jobs and our rights. By 2009, GM was giving the UAW billions of dollars in corporate stock under the bailout organized by the Obama administration. That was a conflict of interest to say the least. Many of us older workers were grandfathered in with decent pensions and medical benefits, but the new hires and young workers were excluded from the union-run retiree health care system. I

have a nephew at the Stellantis plant in Detroit, and he’s struggling. He doesn’t get the medical insurance or pensions we got. Inflation is constantly going up, but wages aren’t. Inflation is at 9 percent, and the raises they get are around 2 percent. It’s simple math. Each year, they are getting a 7 percent pay cut.

“This tier system and part-time temporary employment that the UAW has condoned are BS. When I was hired in during the 1980s, you became a full-timer after 90 days. You were making the same money as the guy next to you, even if he worked there 30 years. That was fair. The company was paying you for a job, and you were offering your labor at that price. Now they pit full-timers against part-timers in a conflict that only divides the ranks. The UAW went along with that. The union is supposed to unite and organize workers, not turn one group or one plant against another. That’s useless and leaves the workers powerless.

“Will is fighting for workers to build rank-and-file committees in every factory. These committees would have to coordinate across GM to organize a strike. That is the only way to put pressure on the companies. Coordination is needed for everybody to walk out in unity. These companies are international, and we got to go international too.

“The older UAW members remember when we had the power. Now the UAW crooks have been caught with their hands in the cookie jar. UAW retirees have a chance to vote this year, and they should vote for Will Lehman. If you are fed up with the UAW bureaucracy, you should stand up and teach the younger generation that nothing was ever won from the corporations without a fight.”

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