

A socialist campaign in the UAW presidential elections

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This week, the United Auto Workers is holding its 38th quadrennial convention in Detroit.

The convention will vote on establishing direct elections for the organization's leadership for the first time in 70 years. This is required following a referendum held under the watch of a court-appointed monitor overseeing the UAW due to the corruption scandal that engulfed its top leadership. The delegates will also nominate candidates for these elections, scheduled for October and November.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has endorsed William Lehman, a 34-year-old Mack Trucks worker, for UAW president. In a letter to all UAW members sent to tens of thousands of workers last week, Lehman outlined the basis of his campaign.

Lehman wrote that “decades of concessions contracts overseen and imposed by the UAW have created a situation where a large section of our members are impoverished.” Workers confront soaring inflation, the spread once again of COVID through the plants, and intensified exploitation from the auto and other companies.

Over the past year, the UAW has worked to force through concessions contracts in the face of growing opposition from the rank and file, including “no” votes of more than 90 percent at Volvo Trucks, Dana, Deere and, most recently, Ventra auto parts.

The letter pointed to the massive corruption scandal, which has implicated a dozen UAW executives, including the two presidents before the current president, Ray Curry. Lehman explained, however, that corruption cannot be understood as something separate from the character of the UAW itself. “The corruption is a product of the UAW bureaucracy's subordination of our interests to the corporate drive for profit,” he wrote.

The UAW, Lehman explained “is a union in name only.” All the traditional functions associated with the unions have been abandoned. It is controlled by a massive apparatus, with assets of more than \$1 billion and an annual payroll of more than \$75 million, that exists to suppress opposition and police the working class.

Lehman's campaign is not aimed at reforming the UAW bureaucracy. “My campaign,” he explained, “is aimed at spearheading a mass movement of the rank and file to break the dictatorship of the apparatus and to transfer power and control over all decision-making processes to the rank and file in the auto plants and all work locations.”

The campaign is advancing a fighting program, including massive wage increases, mandatory cost-of-living adjustments (COLA), an end to all tiers and part-time employment, full funding for pensions and high-quality health care for workers and retirees, and the reestablishment of the eight-hour day.

Most significant, however, is the fact that Lehman puts forward a socialist and internationalist perspective that has been excluded and barricaded from the UAW and all the unions for so long.

The UAW and the other industrial unions were established in the 1930s through militant and insurrectionary class battles led by socialists. The witch hunt against socialists in the 1940s and 1950s, which in the UAW was led by Walter Reuther, was bound up with the subordination of workers to the capitalist system and the Democratic Party.

The expulsion of socialists from the leadership of the UAW initiated a process of degeneration that ultimately led to the obliteration of the unions as working class organizations in any meaningful sense of the word. Beginning with the bailout of Chrysler in 1979, the

UAW apparatus, in response to the protracted decline in the global position of American capitalism, agreed to a series of concessions contracts that at the same time established an ever more direct relationship between the union and corporate management.

“I am a socialist,” Lehman declared. “Socialism recognizes that society is divided into classes. There is a class war taking place right now, but only one class is fighting. Socialism means putting the world’s productive forces under the democratic control of the working class and distributing resources not to enrich a handful of billionaires, but to meet the needs of the whole human race.”

The letter declared the campaign’s opposition to both the Democratic and Republican parties, which “for all their infighting... are controlled by the ruling elite.” It added:

The UAW is a part of this network of political control aimed at depriving working people of any voice whatsoever. And I find it sickening that after decades in which we have been told there is “no money” for schools, public infrastructure or social services, the two parties—including politicians elected with UAW backing—find \$40 billion to escalate a war against Russia over Ukraine that could obliterate humanity.

The Biden administration is aggressively promoting the unions both as an instrument for suppressing the class struggle and as a mechanism for disciplining the working class behind the war drive of the ruling class. In his published report to the convention, UAW President Curry explicitly embraces the US war against Russia over Ukraine as well as the anti-China agitation of the Biden administration.

Lehman’s letter also declared his opposition to the nationalism promoted by the UAW and his support for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. “We confront giant transnational corporations, and we must see ourselves as part of an international movement in order to win.”

On the eve of the convention, Lehman has participated in meetings with Ford workers from

Germany and India, sponsored by the IWA-RFC, to discuss a united campaign of the international working class against job cuts and corporate exploitation.

There is no question that the UAW apparatus will do everything in its power to block Lehman’s campaign. As for the pseudo-left organizations, which posture as “reformers” but in fact work to bolster the apparatus, they have been totally silent. The last thing these organizations of the affluent middle class want is a movement of workers from below.

The campaign of Will Lehman for president of the UAW marks a new point of departure for the working class. Regardless of whether delegates at the UAW convention nominate Lehman and ensure that his name will appear on the ballot, Lehman’s campaign is attracting wide support from workers across the country. It takes place under conditions of explosive class struggle in the US and throughout the world.

On every continent, working people are demonstrating against the rising cost of living, greatly exacerbated by the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine. To stop imperialist war and address the urgent cost of living crisis, this movement must break out of the straitjacket of the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions and acquire a socialist and internationalist character.

The WSWS calls on all workers in the US and throughout the world to support Lehman’s campaign. You can find more information and donate at www.WillForUAWPresident.org.



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