

UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman campaigns on first day of convention

Jerry White
25 July 2022

Will Lehman, Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, campaigned at the UAW 38th Constitutional Convention in Detroit on Monday.

Lehman spoke to dozens of delegates from across the country urging them to stand up and nominate him from the floor of the convention on Wednesday. Lehman is fighting to build a rank-and-file movement against the corrupt UAW bureaucracy. He needs the nomination of at least one delegate to appear on the ballot for the election occurring in October and November.

Lehman told the WSWs that he received a positive response from many delegates at the convention from throughout the US, while the apparatus has responded with hostility and is doing whatever it can to keep him off the ballot.

The proceedings at the convention exposed the immense chasm between rank-and-file workers and the UAW bureaucracy. The organization's top officials, including two national presidents, have been thrown in jail for taking company bribes in exchange for signing sellout contracts and embezzling millions of dollars in workers' dues money for Palm Springs golf trips, expensive parties and luxury goods.

The only reason the union's 391,000 active and 580,000 retired members will have the right to vote for the top leadership positions this year is that the UAW has been put under the oversight of a court-appointed monitor. Last year, workers voted by a 2-to-1 margin in favor of direct elections, a change that was adamantly opposed by current UAW President Ray Curry and the rest of the apparatus.

While Curry and other officials claim the corruption scandal is behind them, the status report by the UAW Monitor submitted to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan last week charged Curry and other International Executive Board members with violating the consent decree and concealing information about ongoing corruption by top officials.

The convention takes place as the UAW bureaucracy confronts a growing rebellion by rank-and-file workers. Workers have rejected UAW-backed contracts over the last year by near-unanimous votes at Volvo Trucks, John Deere, Dana and most recently Tenneco and Ventra.

Opposition is also reaching a boiling point among 155,000

workers at the Big Three automakers—General Motors, Ford and Stellantis (Chrysler)—more than a year in advance of the expiration of their contract. Workers are outraged over the miserable wages the UAW accepted in 2019, which have been more than eaten up by record high inflation.

After the first day of the convention, Will Lehman told the WSWs, "After speaking with delegates, I went into the convention, and they were showing an ingratiating movie congratulating themselves. Delegates were clapping for them while we workers are struggling to make ends meet. I could not stand five minutes of it. I urge rank-and-file workers to come down here and see for yourself what your union dues are being used for."

The convention is being held under the slogan, "Building Our Tomorrow Today," which was selected by the UAW to be as empty and meaningless as possible.

"Platitudes don't pay our bills," Lehman said. "They don't back our fights. The UAW is supposed to be a workers' organization, not a big business. But that is not its nature. It is a business, and its perspective is bankrupt. The apparatus is entirely detached from the shop floor and what workers really need.

"There are other candidates that say things are bad and need to change. But mine is the only campaign stressing that we need an international movement of the working class to combat the international character of capitalism. Production is global, and our struggles must be united globally. The other candidates act like this is not the reality we live in. But workers can use globalized production to our advantage, to strengthen workers and unite as such a force that the corporations can't counter us.

"The other candidates also operate within the framework of the UAW bureaucracy and say changing this or that bureaucrat or a whole slate of bureaucrats is enough to change things. But this has been the same thing tried over the last four decades, and it has failed.

"I am proposing something radically different. To mobilize the ranks to abolish the whole rotten apparatus and give power to the rank and file. These ideas have been gaining traction among the most honest delegates, who understand that something much more is required to win. The bureaucracy fears that its plush positions are being threatened, and they will do

anything to protect themselves no matter how much it affects workers.

“I have been calling on delegates to stand up and not be afraid. They need to put the needs of workers before their career interests. Workers at Deere, Ventra, HarperCollins and other plants are willing to take risks and sacrifice everything to strike. There should be delegates willing to take risks and stand up for the workers they say they represent.”

Lehman continued, “The IEB is sitting on their fat salaries while workers are fighting 9 percent inflation and gas that costs \$4.50 to \$5.00 a gallon. They tell workers to sit and wait until the expiration of illegitimate contracts, which were signed by union officials who took bribes. We should fight now. The companies are refusing to honor contracts.

“In his president’s report, Curry takes credit for Volvo Trucks and Deere strikes. He didn’t lead those strikes, the workers did. He sold out those struggles. He refused to back them with full strike pay to escalate the struggle by bringing more workers’ power into it. Instead, he starved workers with \$275 a week in strike pay and forced them to accept miserable contracts. And the increase to \$400 a week in strike pay is not enough for a HarpersCollins worker in New York City or a Ventra worker in Evart, Michigan.”

The WSWS spoke to several delegates on the first day of the convention. Many expressed concern over the growing anger of workers. One representative from UAW Local 833 in Sheboygan, Wisconsin said that workers were angered over the outcome of the 32-day strike by 2,300 workers at the kitchen and bathroom fixture maker Kohler in 2015.

“The young workers want to get rid of the two-tier wage system and want full pension benefits like older workers,” he said.

Two delegates from Lordstown, Ohio said workers are livid over the UAW’s acceptance of the plant’s closure as part of the agreement to end the 2019 GM strike. “The plant is gone. GM sold it to Lordstown Motors and gave them a \$40 million loan. The conman Steve Burns took the money and sold it to FoxConn for \$230 million. GM went out of its way to kill the plant.

“The workers who lost their jobs were dispersed to Missouri, Kentucky, other states. Some of these guys had to leave their families behind and are living in apartments with other workers. We have 38 active members and 7,000 retirees in our local. We’re hoping to get new members at the battery plant where GM has a deal with the Korean company LG.” To get new paying members, the UAW has already agreed to substandard pay and benefits at GM subsidiaries and battery operations in Michigan.

Another delegate was from UAW Local 933, which just signed a five-year deal at defense contractor and engine maker Rolls-Royce North America in Indianapolis, Indiana. “My dad was the president of UAW Local 23 at the GM Stamping plant in Indianapolis [which closed in 2011]. There is nothing but a

skeleton left of that plant now. The local workers stood up against an agreement the UAW International made with a new owner to cut their pay in half to keep the plant open. The workers wanted transfer rights to other plants too. That’s why the rank and file voted down the contract.”

At an August 15, 2010 meeting of Local 23, workers shouted down and chased UAW International official Mike Grimes, the assistant director of the UAW-GM Department, out of the meeting.

In addition to the self-congratulatory comments from top UAW officers, the first day of the convention included speeches praising the UAW bureaucracy from Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and Michigan’s US Senator Gary Peters. Both Democrats have showered the automakers with massive tax breaks.

Last Friday, Curry met with US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to declare the UAW’s support for the Democrats’ CHIPS ACT, which includes \$50 billion in government handouts to US microchip manufacturers.

In a meeting with corporate heads and union leaders Monday, President Biden declared, “Listen to the business leaders here today and across the country. They’re making decisions right now about where to invest and ramp up production of these semiconductors. Are they going to invest in China, India, Japan, South Korea, the European Union? The United States has to lead the world in the production of these chips.”

The UAW is fully behind the administration’s plans to “re-shore” microchip and other manufacturing and is committed to lowering the wages of workers to achieve it. Facing a rising tide of working class opposition, the Biden administration is desperately looking to the discredited UAW bureaucracy to force workers to pay for the capitalist economic crisis and the costs of its increasingly reckless military confrontation with Russia and China.

Referring to the nationalist and pro-war program of the UAW, Lehman said, “That’s not workers’ internationalism that we need. I am saying to workers that no matter what country a worker is in, that’s your class brother and sister. They view workers all over the world as commodities to make profits off of and pit one against the other. I am running for UAW president to fight for a completely different perspective. To fight the global corporations we need to unite workers globally.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact