

The social physiognomy of an American trade union executive: The case of Connor M. Lewis

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4 August 2022

A trade union bureaucrat named Connor M. Lewis attacked the World Socialist Web Site earlier this week in response to Mack Trucks autoworker Will Lehman's nomination for UAW president at the union's recent convention in Detroit. WSWS writer Eric London responded with a Twitter thread that we republish below:

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Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) official Connor M. Lewis has attacked the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party, and it's worth looking at where this attack comes from. He is a case study in the social physiognomy of the American trade union apparatus. What is the source of the extreme hostility to the WSWS/SEP?

Lewis is a parasite who is enriching himself on workers' dues. He first attempted to get a Ph.D. but soon left academia and decided to make a more lucrative career as a union bureaucrat. He started when grad students attempted to unionize at Penn State University, making just \$41,778 in 2017.

But then his pay began to skyrocket. His salary doubled to \$99,470 in 2018, went to \$127,075 in 2019 and then \$138,326 in 2020, the last year for which information is available. In total, he made a whopping \$405,649 in just four years.

According to the PSEA's federal filings, each teacher pays \$553 in dues. This means it took the dues of 733 teachers to pay Lewis' bloated salary from 2017-2020. This is a staggering degree of exploitation which allows Lewis to live in the top 10 percent while teachers risk their lives every day.

The PSEA is hated by rank-and-file teachers for its role in forcing teachers back to school during the pandemic on behalf of Pennsylvania's Democratic Governor Tom Wolf. One teacher and PSEA member told the WSWS, "The PSEA president and all their minions totally

dropped the ball. They're going along with whatever Wolf and the districts say. They aren't working to protect the teachers and students. When you file a grievance and ask about it, PSEA tells you that you aren't following the 'chain of command.' That is just code words for 'I don't want to be bothered.'"

Union executives like Lewis are essentially Democratic Party staff whose salaries are paid by workers' dues. Looking at his Twitter, Lewis regularly promotes Democratic politicians, including most recently Andy Levin, who just voted for \$40 billion for the Ukraine military in the US-NATO war against Russia.

The PSEA has donated tens of millions of dollars to capitalist parties in recent years, including \$16.3 million to the Democrats and \$3.7 million to the Republicans! In 2018, it gave \$1.6 million to Wolf, the pro-corporate governor whose deadly "back to work/school" policy the PSEA has implemented.

The PSEA also gave \$813,000 to Wolf in 2014, over \$1 million to right-wing Clinton backer and former Democratic Governor Ed Rendell and \$275,000 to Democratic Senator Bob Casey. It even funded the 2018 campaign of pro-Trump legislator Jacob Corman III, who supported a Trump-inspired audit of the 2020 election!

After winning the election with PSEA backing, Wolf has slashed corporate taxes from 10 percent to 5 percent. The state Chamber of Commerce praised it: "We applaud the actions of the Wolf administration." Wolf said: "No longer will we ask the businesses that power our economy to pay the highest rate in the nation."

What is the impact of the PSEA's collaboration with Wolf and the corporations amid the coronavirus pandemic? Teachers and students are dying, and the PSEA is politically responsible. While Lewis sits back and cashes his \$5,300 pretax paychecks, here's what's happening to the teachers whose dues he collects.

On January 2, at the height of the Omicron surge last

winter, 33-year-old teacher's aide Brittany Lauderback died from COVID-19. She worked with 4th and 5th graders at Colonial Elementary School, where the local union appears to be affiliated with the PSEA.

Since 2020, the SEP and WSWs helped organize the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to oppose the deadly school reopening policies imposed by the PSEA, PFT (Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers), AFT (American Federation of Teachers) and the Democrats in Pennsylvania.

The committee was involved in organizing the shift to remote learning at Olney Charter High School and other schools last winter after the death of 17-year-old Alayna Thach, while the PSEA was enforcing the brutal policies to keep schools open as demanded by President Joe Biden.

Also in January during the Omicron surge, 47-year-old Andrew Jenkins died from COVID-19 despite being fully vaccinated. He taught at Pennfield Middle School, represented by North Penn Education Association, which seems to be affiliated with the PSEA.

Here are some of the others who have died due to the back-to-school campaign by the Democrats and trade unions. Rest in peace:

- Paraprofessional Lisa Burhannan, 50, died on 06/11/2020 and worked for the Harrisburg School District in Harrisburg;
- Counselor Alexandra Chitwood, 47, died 11/4/2020 and worked at Manheim Township Middle School in Lancaster;
- Paraprofessional Shelby Wagner, 30, died on 01/19/2021 and worked for the Reading School District in Reading;
- Coach Rob Reed, 56, died on 09/08/2021 and worked at Northern Bedford High School in South Woodbury Township; and
- Teacher and coach Mike Gurdineer, 41, died on 09/08/2021 and worked at Northampton Area Middle School in Northampton.

And many, many more. I can't confirm whether each was a PSEA member, but they died after working in districts where the PSEA had a role in enforcing Wolf's back-to-school policy. The PSEA's website on COVID-19 safety hasn't been updated in at least eight months. Callous indifference.

The PSEA has accumulated massive assets by robbing teachers of dues money, while doing the dirty work for the corporations and two parties. In the last year of the pandemic per federal filings, the PSEA's assets increased

from \$140 million to \$160 million.

Lewis attacked SEP National Secretary Joe Kishore for buying a \$700 laptop for his presidential campaign with funds donated by his supporters explicitly to advance the campaign, but the PSEA has spent tens of millions of struggling teachers' dues money.

This includes a massive \$445,000 expenditure for "copier rental" in 2021! That's the annual dues for 806 teachers. Or the \$18,928 for "maintenance support" to Dell. There are too many expenses to review here, but PSEA did spend \$45,000 on one "leadership conference" for its executives at the Hilton.

And by the way, the PSEA paid only \$5,000 in strike pay during the same period. And per the *Pennsylvania Capital-Star*, teachers now make 11 percent less than they did 30 years ago. Meanwhile, the average salary of PSEA executives has increased from \$90,000 in 2002 to \$130,000 today.

The PSEA, like all unions, is a parasitic organization that enriches bureaucrats while selling out workers. It has \$160 million in assets, including \$83,394,509 in *cash*. It also has \$54 million invested in Wall Street. In 2000 its assets were only \$50 million.

As for Lewis, he is a longtime Democrat who has promoted campaigns of various Democrats and sucks up union dues to essentially serve as a Democratic staffer. In 2017 he proposed an amendment at the Democratic Socialists of America convention calling for the DSA to endorse candidates inside the Democratic Party.

The parasites that staff the union bureaucracy have nothing to do with the class struggle. They have no experience in the class struggle beyond selling workers out. They are extremely sensitive because Will Lehman was nominated for UAW president.

Lehman's campaign aims to mobilize the rank and file to take power from the executives and give it to the workers themselves on the shop floor. Lewis knows he will lose his salary and comfortable existence when we succeed.

It's always an honor to be attacked by parasites like Lewis. It only improves our reputation among the rank and file.



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