

# Why Canadian autoworkers should support Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president

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*Are you an autoworker in Canada or do you work in the parts industry? Send us your statements of support for Will Lehman's campaign and get involved in the fight to build rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-corporate Unifor and UAW apparatuses.*

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Autoworkers and all workers in Canada should actively support the campaign by Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman for the presidency of the United Auto Workers (UAW). A socialist, Lehman is fighting for workers to build rank-and-file committees in every workplace independent of the pro-company union apparatus and to abolish the UAW bureaucracy that has imposed decades of contract concessions and betrayals.

At the centre of Lehman's campaign is the fight to unite workers in the United States with their class brothers and sisters in Canada and internationally in a counter-offensive against the worldwide onslaught on jobs, wages, and working conditions pursued by the corporate elite and their political hirelings.

Lehman secured the nomination of two delegates at the recently concluded UAW convention in Detroit, where the corrupt bureaucracy sought through manipulation and intimidation to block his candidacy. This victory means that Lehman has met all requirements to appear on the ballot in the first direct election of a UAW president in over 70 years this fall. This election is taking place only because it was demanded by the government-appointed monitor as a means to rehabilitate the union following a years-long corruption scandal that has engulfed the UAW's entire top leadership.

Lehman's campaign has won strong support among rank-and-file autoworkers because it articulates their burning anger over decades of UAW-enforced concessions and their eagerness to launch a militant fight back.

Conditions for autoworkers in Canada are no different to those south of the border. Beginning on August 8, workers across Canada will witness the spectacle of a crisis-ridden Unifor—the country's largest private sector union with some 315,000 members—attempting to plough through its triennial national convention with as little mention as possible of the black cloud of corruption and bureaucratic double-dealing hanging over the entire organization. This past spring long-time president Jerry Dias was defrocked, after being exposed as a shameless COVID-19 profiteer in a rotten kickback operation. Added into the equation is the relentless string of concessions contracts rammed through

countless bargaining units as wages stagnate, jobs are shed and work rules gutted.

Dias' corruption is only the most grotesque expression of an organization that has been fully integrated into corporate management and the capitalist state, and which is staffed by highly paid bureaucrats with fat personal expense accounts dedicated to defending the interests of the bureaucracy against the workers.

As the convention unfolds, delegates will be presented with a choice of three career union bureaucrats to replace the disgraced Jerry Dias and get on with the job of trying to apply a thin veneer of "respectability" on the union logo. It will be a tall order, one perhaps best left to a sleight-of-hand magician.

At its leadership convention late last month, the UAW bureaucracy did all it could to suppress opposition to its record of endemic corruption, which has seen more than a dozen senior officials indicted and jailed, including two recent presidents and several vice presidents. The current president, Ray Curry, who presided over the convention, is himself now under criminal investigation for withholding evidence on further corruption in the union.

Lehman's campaign is the most conscious expression of a growing rebellion of rank-and-file UAW members against the corrupt, pro-company union, which, like Unifor, has for decades imposed round after round of concessions and job cuts, while systematically pitting workers in Canada, the US and Mexico against each other. The rebellion comprises a wave of recent militant struggles, including at Volvo Trucks, Dana and John Deere. Workers have taken up the call of the WSWWS and its Autoworker Newsletter for the formation of rank-and-file committees to break the stranglehold of the UAW bureaucracy and launch a counter-offensive to overturn the decades of UAW-backed concessions. These struggles aim to win major improvements in living standards and working conditions, including the overturning of the hated multi-tier wage system, cost-of-living adjustments to keep pace with rampant inflation, and job security.

There is a long tradition of united struggles by Canadian and US workers, which Unifor, its Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) predecessor, and the UAW have played the principal role in concealing and denigrating for the past four decades. All the upheavals of American workers, from the Knights of Labor to the IWW and CIO, won a massive response from Canadian workers, who recognized they were fighting against the same bosses.

Workers in Canada invited the UAW to organize them after being inspired by the sit-down strikes in the 1930s—and in 1945 they organized a massive blockade in Windsor to shutdown auto production. Every effort to unite with workers in the US was bitterly resisted by the Canadian elite, which invariably invoked Canadian nationalism and bitter opposition to socialism.

Despite the best efforts of the pro-capitalist bureaucrats in Unifor and the UAW, who prioritize their “partnerships” with corporate bosses and government officials over everything else, the bonds of struggle between American and Canadian autoworkers remain strong.

Recognizing that the companies and unions had no interest in protecting their health and lives as the COVID-19 pandemic spread, workers at the Windsor (Fiat-Chrysler, now Stellantis) Assembly Plant spontaneously downed tools in mid-March 2020, sparking similar wildcat job action by workers at Detroit Three auto plants across the United States. The protests were also directed against Unifor and the UAW south of the border, as both unions had pledged to work with management to keep the plants running without interruption. The actions by rank-and-file workers played a major role in forcing governments in North America and Europe to impose temporary lockdowns, which, while inadequate and quickly rescinded, saved millions of lives.

The globalization of production and the associated dismantling of much of industry in the more economically-advanced countries in the 1980s fatally undermined the ability of the pro-capitalist unions to pressure capital for concessions in the national labor market. The response of the unions to the emergence of a global labour market has been to join with the bosses in demanding workers make “their” employers more “competitive,” i.e., whip-saw contracts back and forth across borders to force through concessions, speed-up and job cuts. This nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective serves to block any united action on the part of workers in North America and around the world against the transnational giants like GM, Ford, Toyota, and Volkswagen that are relentlessly seeking to intensify the exploitation of all workers, irrespective of their nationality.

The birth of the CAW—Unifor’s main forerunner—in 1985 sprang directly from the promulgation of a nationalist program that divided North American workers, and gave a huge opening for the Big Three auto companies to intensify their practice of “whip-sawing” contracts and jobs back and forth across the Canada-US border to secure the lowest possible wages, benefits and employment levels. Bob White, the bureaucrat who led the CAW split, explicitly rejected any appeal to American and Canadian workers for a joint rebellion against the Solidarity House bureaucracy. The split led by White was aimed at propping up the bureaucracy on both sides of the border, and giving each a freer-hand to maneuver with corporate management in imposing wage and job cuts and pitting workers in the US and Canada against each other.

Unifor’s formation in 2013 led to an intensification of this anti-worker record as the union was integrated ever more fully into the capitalist state. Dias functioned to all intents and purposes as an adviser to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government, including during the renegotiation of the North

American Free Trade Agreement to lay the basis for an even more explicitly anti-China protectionist trade bloc to advance the economic, military, and geopolitical ambitions of Canadian and US imperialism around the world.

In each bargaining round that Dias led with the Detroit Three automakers, he functioned ever more openly as a cheap-labour contractor, offering big business the givebacks they demanded to remain “globally competitive,” that is highly profitable, at the expense of workers’ jobs and living standards. And under Dias’ leadership, Unifor played a major role in enforcing the ruling class’ ruinous profits-before-lives pandemic policy, helping herd workers back into unsafe workplaces amid the worst health crisis in a century.

The task now facing Unifor members is to translate opposition to the continuing attacks on their living standards into a conscious political struggle against the insatiable drive of the corporations for never-ending union-imposed concessions. The formation of rank-and-file committees by workers in every plant and workplace to fight for decent wages, benefits and working conditions and a safe and healthy workplace is posed with ever greater urgency as the capitalist crisis deepens.

In fighting to establish such committees, workers must decisively repudiate Unifor’s Canadian nationalism and subordination of workers’ jobs and livelihoods to corporate profits. Instead, workers must base themselves on the understanding that they confront the same fundamental problems in every country and that what is required is an internationalist and socialist perspective to unify the struggles of autoworkers in Canada, the United States, Mexico and around the world. Autoworkers in Canada can take a significant step in this struggle by mobilizing support for Lehman, whose campaign is aimed at facilitating the construction of a network of rank-and-file committees under the leadership of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees to coordinate a global counter-offensive by the working class against the globally-organized automakers and their ravenous pursuit of profit.



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