“We need to get back to our roots”: Growing rank-and-file support for Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president

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For more information on Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.

On Saturday, August 27 at 5 p.m. Eastern, Will Lehman will be holding a live online Q&A. Learn more and register to attend.

Will Lehman began a Midwestern tour with campaign stops at auto factories in the Metro Detroit area, the home of thousands of auto and auto parts workers. Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker from Macungie, Pennsylvania and socialist candidate for UAW president, spoke with Ford and Chrysler (Stellantis) workers on Sunday and Monday.

Lehman started at the historic Ford Rouge Complex, the site of early battles by workers to establish the UAW in the 1930s and 1940s. He received a warm welcome from workers at Ford’s Dearborn Truck Plant (DTP) who are angered over years of UAW-backed concession contracts that have undermined their wages and working conditions.

A veteran DTP worker with nearly three decades seniority stopped and told Will, “In five to 10 years, the UAW will be gone. The people in the leadership positions think they are on Easy Street because they don’t have to do anything. They don’t have to represent, they don’t have to pay grievances, they’re just embezzling money. The union is a business for them.

“At the UAW convention, they took away a 100-dollar increase in strike pay and gave themselves big fat raises. There was a time when cost of living rolled over year after year. At the end of each contract, whatever that cost-of-living raise was, $1, $2, or $3, it got rolled into our already existing salary. Then it started at the beginning of the contract again and built itself back up. That was removed long before 2009, in the earlier 2000s.

“The union office at our plant has been locked. If you don’t have their phone number, good luck getting a hold of anybody. They’ve done the same thing at Local 600 down the street. You walk into a foyer, and there’s a person, basically a security guard, sitting there asking, ‘What can I help you with?’ A rank-and-file member cannot access the office.

“The entire union machine needs to be wiped out from the top to the bottom, and we need to get back to our roots,” he said.

Scores of workers, including young lower-paid temporary and second-tier workers, signed up to get more information about Will’s campaign.

Workers at DTP produce Ford’s highly profitable F-150 pickup trucks. Last month, the company announced that it had tripled its second-quarter earnings to $3.7 billion. *Bloomberg News* reported Monday that Ford is cutting 3,000 jobs, including 2,000 salaried and 1,000 contract job cuts, mostly in the US. This is part of Ford’s plan to cut at least 8,000 jobs worldwide as it shifts investment to electric vehicles. Already thousands of production jobs have been cut in India, Germany and other countries.

On Monday, Will campaigned during the early morning and afternoon shift changes at three Chrysler factories in the Detroit area: Warren Truck Assembly, Warren Stamping and the Detroit Assembly Complex-Jefferson Plant. The French-Italian-American conglomerate Stellantis recorded $8 billion in profits in the first half of 2022, up 34 percent from the year before, wrenched out of workers with the UAW’s assistance.

Lehman campaigned outside of the Warren Truck plant, where the third shift had just returned after a two-week layoff due to parts shortages. After forcing the chiefly temporary workforce to labor 10-12 hour days, six days a week, workers now face the loss of their jobs. Stellantis has already eliminated the third shift at the nearby Jefferson Assembly plant, and there is speculation that it could soon close its Belvidere, Illinois assembly plant and one of its two Trenton, Michigan engine plants.

Dozens of workers signed up for more information about Will’s campaign. Writing down his contact information, one worker said, “After paying union dues for two years and not getting represented, I don’t believe in the UAW anymore.”

After hearing Will explain he was fighting against all layoffs and plant closures and to immediately convert part-time workers into full-timers, a young worker on the midnight shift said, “When we applied for this job, they said it was specifically for the third shift. We went through months of training and started in January. We never missed a day. We were never late, and now they are threatening to lay us off. They put me down in a pit to work on these cars. I really worked hard, and they wanted to bump a full timer from the job. I didn’t want that to happen.

“We worked six days a week, 10 hours a day. We were working so much I was able to put away two paychecks into savings. We didn’t have time for anything else. Now all of that is being snatched from us.”

Will said, “The UAW originally fought for eight-hour days and 40-hour weeks, but they allowed the companies to abolish that. These tiers the UAW bureaucrats agreed to only divide workers up. The company and the union are saying you are a lower class. We need to recognize our own self-worth. You do 100 percent the same work as full-timers, and you should be paid 100 percent for it. We need to form rank-and-file committees so workers can talk to each other and discuss what they need. We’re letting the UAW call the shots and

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that's why we are losing jobs and everything else."

The worker responded, "Thanks for listening, at least somebody is listening to what we have to say."

Will also spoke to workers at the nearby Warren Stamping plant, which lost 40 workers last month. One worker told him, "It's going downhill so fast. Every weekend is mandatory. It started as four 10-hour days, now it's six days. I never see my kids. Right now, they're finishing a conveyor system, and by Christmas they'll have robots. Then we're going to see more layoffs."

"I have 25 years, and I hate this place," another worker said. Pointing to the UAW, he said, "They stole $25,000 from each of us. A lot of the criminals who went to prison came from this plant. I would sell Black Lake (the UAW golf, vacation and "training" grounds in northern Michigan) and start giving us back the cash they stole from us."

A young "supplemental employee" (SE) said, "There's not enough people in there, but they won't roll us over to full-time or hire more workers. They create imaginary people to supposedly help us on assignments. They force two or three guys to do what is supposed to be a four-man job. When you complain to the UAW committeeman, he says, 'It's over my head, I can't do anything about it.' But they will take union dues out of our pockets."

Another young SE said, "There are workers here that have not been rolled over to full-time for years. Now they've laid off workers with eight or nine years' seniority. The company is constantly cutting corners for profit. The SEs get no representation from the UAW and don't get profit-sharing checks like full-time workers.

"They put us on the hardest jobs. There is no time to rest, and that creates more injuries. One guy's legs just gave out, and they pushed him aside to keep the line running. Now, SEs are only getting two days of work a week; that's just $200 a week. A lot of us are taking side jobs just to survive."

A veteran full-time worker at Warren Stamping told Will, "They always say they're not making enough money to pay decent wages and keep our jobs. That's what they said during the bankruptcy in 2009, now they're making record profits and still won't give us cost-of-living and raises to keep up with inflation."

The factory is located across the street from the former GM Hydra-Matic transmission plant, which is being demolished as part of the UAW-GM 2019 contract. Asked what it was like to come out of his plant every day and look at the factory across the street being demolished, a young worker said, "We look at that and think that could be us soon."

Will explained that the UAW had long colluded with the corporations to close plants. And even though the UAW membership has fallen by over 1 million since 1978, the assets of the union bureaucracy grew to over $1 billion. This was due to the direct funding from the corporations and the UAW's business investments.

He urged the young worker to support his campaign to build a powerful movement from below to abolish the UAW apparatus and build rank-and-file committees to wage a fight to defend jobs and vastly improve living standards and working conditions.

At the Jefferson plant, Will spoke to workers driving in and out of work during the afternoon shift change. Workers signed up for text updates and expressed their support for his campaign. A worker with more than a decade at the plant said, "Since they eliminated the third shift, they got us on crazy, stupid hours. I have kids, and I don't like it. The UAW leaders don't do a thing."

She added, "At least 50 workers died from COVID at our plant. Now there's monkeypox, and they want us to sign some paper that asks us if we know of anybody who was infected. How are we supposed to know? There was an outbreak of monkeypox at SHAP (Sterling Heights Assembly Plant), and the company and the union concealed it. They just want to shift the blame onto us—just like they've done with COVID. Why would I sign a paper like that?"

After campaigning, Will Lehman reflected on his discussions with workers. "I've been stressing the need to build rank-and-file committees. Workers already have the power for change; it is only a matter of organizing. It's not about me, it's about all of us. One worker at the Jefferson plant told me some workers start below $16 an hour at his plant. He said you could go to McDonald's and get that. We all deserve a living wage, whether you are a fast food worker or an autoworker. But what does it say about the UAW that workers at McDonald's without any union are making the same or even more than a worker who belongs to this conglomerate of an organization?

"At Ford, I told workers they need to realize, it is the working class in the automotive sector that built Detroit and Flint, not the Henry Fords and these corporations who are given credit for it by the capitalist establishment. It is capitalism that is responsible for the decline of the Motor City. It was also the betrayal of trust by the UAW. We've paid dues and trusted this organization to protect our jobs, and they sold us out.

"On a personal note, my family had GM trucks and the transmissions were Hydra-Matic TH-350s and others. The transmission on my grandfather's Chevy pickup was built by workers at that factory that is now gone, along with the workers who made their living there. It's sickening that it was closed without a fight, without any struggle to unite workers around the world. Because of the nationalist and pro-capitalist policies of the UAW, this city has suffered tremendously.

"I have spoken to lots of workers who have come up with creative ideas to protect ourselves that have been stifled by the UAW bureaucracy. My campaign has revealed the ingenuity of what a workers' organization would be if it was not strangled by a bureaucracy. Every worker needs a voice and deserves to hear each other. Every worker needs to lead this fight.

"Our interests are completely hostile to the companies. But all you see on these factories are UAW flags, and UAW-GM this, UAW-Ford that. Workers are stopping to talk because my message is so different. Workers are totally disenfranchised by this organization. That is why we need to abolish the apparatus, take control of the assets, that we built up, and use them to wage a real fight for our needs."

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