

“Everything has gotten worse since the UAW sold out the GM strike”: UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman speaks to workers in Flint, Michigan

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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.

United Auto Workers presidential candidate Will Lehman received a strong response from General Motors workers when he brought his campaign to GM’s Flint Assembly Plant Tuesday afternoon.

More than 5,000 workers produce GM’s most profitable pickup trucks at the massive factory 60 miles north of Detroit.

The “Vehicle City” is the birthplace of both GM and the UAW. In 1936-37, militant workers, led by socialists, carried out a 44-day occupation of GM’s factories in Flint, forcing the company to recognize the UAW.

The anti-socialist purges led by UAW President Walter Reuther in the 1940s and 1950s consolidated the grip of a pro-capitalist bureaucracy, which has spent the last four decades colluding with management in destroying the gains won by workers through generations of struggle.

In their discussions with Lehman at the plant gate, the anger and disgust of workers with the UAW bureaucracy was intense.

“We went out on strike in 2019 to stop the increase in health care costs, but it has only gotten worse since,” a young worker told Lehman. “All the medicines, physical rehab and mental health co-pays have gone up. The only ones who say things got better after the strike are the guys who were stealing the money,” the worker

said, referring to the UAW bureaucrats like former presidents Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, who were convicted and jailed for embezzling union assets.

After leaving 46,000 GM workers on the picket line for 40 days with poverty-level strike pay, the UAW pressured workers to sign a sellout contract with an \$11,000 “signing bonus.” The worker told Will, “We lost way more than that during the strike. We should have stayed out until we stopped the increase in out-of-pocket health care and until we converted the temps to full-time.”

Lehman replied, “The strike fund is paid for by us. That’s our dues that built that up, and it’s our struggle that the fund needs to be used for. That’s supposed to be our war chest, but the UAW uses it as a plaything.

“The International reps don’t lose pay when we go on strike. Ray Curry gets \$300,000 a year, and he doesn’t care when we got \$275 a week when we struck Mack in 2019, or when you struck GM. We should get our full income so we can wage the type of fights necessary to win.”

“The temps were screwed,” another worker said. Under the UAW-GM agreement, she said, “You are a part-time temporary worker for one year. Then you have to work another year as a temporary full-time worker. After that you’re supposed to be converted to full-time. But they make you jump through hoops, and if you’re laid off for more than 30 days, you got to start over again.”

A skilled tradesman added, “The company consolidated classifications and took away our holidays. They were supposed to convert the temporary

workers to full-time, but that has never gotten done.”

One worker responding to a campaigner who handed her a leaflet on Will’s campaign said, “Oh yeah, he’s the Mack Truck worker. I’ve read some of his stuff and I like his program.” She said Will was very young and she didn’t know if he had the experience to become a leader in the UAW. The campaigner responded, “Will is not trying to join the bureaucracy but build a movement of workers from below to sweep out the UAW apparatus.” The only “experience” the UAW bureaucrats had, he said, was collaborating with corporations against the workers.

She agreed, saying, “They’re all corrupt up there. Getting rich while we get poorer. Something needs to change, and I want to thank you all for this campaign.”

Several dozen workers left information to get text updates. Many workers shouted messages of support. One worker said, “I hope he’ll fight for us to gain things. The UAW has given up something in every contract.”

After the shift change ended, an official from UAW Local 598 came up to the campaigners and told them to leave. “This is GM property,” he said. “You can’t be here.” Will asserted his right to campaign for UAW president like any other candidate. The UAW bureaucrat slinked away and called plant security.

The UAW is currently under court monitorship for a “culture of corruption,” which has led to the jailing of 11 union officials. This includes Norwood Jewell, the former UAW plant chairman at GM’s Flint Metal Center and director of UAW Region 1-C in Flint.

Jewell was convicted of taking illegal payments for travel, lodging and other perks from Fiat Chrysler executives in exchange for signing a sweetheart contract that maintained the hated two-tier system and expanded the use of part-time temps. As a major player in the local Democratic Party establishment, he had a direct hand in the pro-corporate schemes that led to the Flint Water Crisis.

After the campaign at the factory, Lehman visited supporters in a nearby working-class neighborhood, ravaged by years of plant closings, budget cuts and poverty. In 1978, there were 78,000 GM jobs in the city. Today, there are fewer than 10,000.

Lehman spoke to one mother of three children who said small children had suffered terrible physical and mental defects from the lead poisoning of the Flint

River. “My daughter was having problems, and we didn’t know what it was until she tested positive for high levels of lead.”

She also pointed to the abandoned and burned-out houses in the neighborhood that had once been owned by autoworkers and their families. “I agree with Will’s campaign for rank-and-file committees, and I want to build up support for his campaign. At the same time, we need rank-and-file committees in the neighborhoods to defend our rights too.”

After the campaign, Will told the WSWS: “Flint is a city ravaged by a corporation indifferent to human need and a capitalist political establishment, with willing UAW lackeys that are completely complicit. This was once one of the best cities for a working-class person to live in. After decades of plant closings, layoffs and corporate pollution, aided and abetted by the UAW, conditions are hostile to human existence.

“My campaign isn’t aimed at reforms in the bureaucracy. It is directed to the workers, the real force through which any change can be brought about.

“If you’re on the fence, you have to ask yourself: Where is the point when you say you are not going to take this anymore? We already have 8.5 percent inflation. They’re coming to take everything from us. It is time to build a movement to fight.”

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