

As teachers continue strike in Columbus, Ohio, UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman visits picket lines

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

More than 4,500 teachers, nurses, librarians and other educators are continuing their powerful strike in Columbus, Ohio. The Biden administration, concerned the walkout could spark a wider movement of educators against the unsafe reopening of schools, social inequality and austerity, has intervened with a federal mediator in an effort to crush the strike before teachers can win their demands.

On Wednesday, Will Lehman, socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, visited the picket lines and issued a statement calling on workers in the UAW, along with all teachers and other sections of the working class, to mobilize in support of the striking Columbus teachers. "In their defense of public education," Lehman said, "they are fighting for the interests of all workers, and they can't win this fight alone."

The district, which is controlled by the Democratic Party, is insisting on a real wage cut for educators, offering an insulting 3 percent raise annually over three years under conditions of 8.5 percent inflation, with a one-time \$2,000 sweetener.

Following 23 bargaining sessions which have failed to come up with an agreement, neither the Columbus Education Association (CEA) nor the district released any information about the resumption of talks Wednesday ordered by the federal mediator. The local CBS news outlet reported that "talks are continuing in an undisclosed location."

Educators in the state's largest district are conducting their first strike in nearly 50 years. They are demanding proper learning conditions for children, including air conditioning and heating in all buildings, lower class sizes, a cap on the number of classes per day and wages that keep up with the rate of inflation. Teachers are speaking out and posting photos of the rodent and roach infestations in schools, black mold and outdated, filthy ventilation systems.

Workers across the city, well aware of the crisis in the schools, have turned out on the picket line, bringing their children to show support and making donations to the educators. The determination to fight is palpable across

Columbus.

One striking educator told the WSWs, "Teachers are feeling proud and standing strong. I am hearing no talk whatsoever of wavering. Every step the district takes to demoralize us actually has the opposite effect. Every action is fueling this, and we are sticking with our goal.

"We had a ton of students come down and participate since it was supposed to be their first day of school. We're getting lots of support, food and drinks being dropped off, flowers, compliments, honks, therapy animals."

In a provocative attack, district officials tried to terminate teachers' health care. Due to a failure to give legal notice, however, this attack was temporarily stymied. The district officials did, however, freeze educators' Flexible Spending Accounts, funds that educators themselves contribute to.

The CEA's parent organization, the National Education Association (NEA), is not paying educators strike pay, even though it has assets of over \$400 million. Neither the NEA nor the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has done anything to mobilize the millions of educators who face the same struggle and would readily join a common fight. On the contrary, the unions have blocked strikes, including by the 35,000 members of the NEA and AFT affiliated United Teachers Los Angeles nearly two months after the expiration of their contract.

"There should be a national teachers strike," Nicole, a striking teacher, told Will Lehman as he joined teachers on the picket line at the Columbus Downtown High School. "That is the only way that we are going to be heard.

"It is getting so bad in public education that college students don't want teaching to be their major anymore. There are not enough resources. We have to pay around \$1,000 out of our own pockets for supplies every year. There was a dead mouse outside the locker of one of my students. There are also cockroaches. I was carrying a sign with a picture of mice and roaches and saying, 'These are not classroom pets.'"

Lehman stressed that autoworkers just like teachers had to develop the means to communicate with each other about their struggles and to coordinate actions. Because the union

apparatus was opposed to this, he said, it was up to rank-and-file workers to organize and prepare such struggles. Lehman said that what was necessary was a counter-offensive by educators, nurses, autoworkers and all workers against raging prices and exploitation.

A teacher with over 30 years teaching told Lehman, “My breaking point was knowing that it’s happening everywhere. The problem is not limited to one school. In every school, conditions are terrible and getting worse.

“The schools are falling apart. They’re old and haven’t been properly maintained. There’s no air conditioning, no proper ventilation; it gets so hot my kids fall asleep. They can’t stay awake during class. It’s dangerous, and you can’t teach kids under those conditions.

“I’ve been a teacher for 34 years, here in Columbus since 1990, and things have only gone downhill. Teachers here haven’t been on strike since 1975, and it’s about time we do something. It’s not just here that teachers are facing problems; it’s everywhere. The same, or similar, issues come up in almost every district. It would be great to be able to stand together to fight.”

Responding to Will’s call for the unity of all workers, she said, “I agree that autoworkers and teachers, all workers really, need to stand together. I’ve heard about the corruption in the UAW, but it’s broader than just the UAW. I’m all for rank-and-file power and standing against the bureaucracy. We have to do something, and this sounds like a good thing to do.”

“This has been building up for a long time,” another teacher said, “but we said enough when nothing was done to fix broken HVAC systems and cap class sizes even at 32 students. In the winter sometimes it’s 90 degrees in a classroom, and sometimes it’s 40 degrees. Not having proper HVAC is terrible, especially with COVID. The district got federal money to fix it, but we don’t know where the money went. We’re fighting not just for educators and our kids but for all working people.”

Traci, a veteran teacher at Columbus Downtown High School, said, “They won’t even guarantee us 45 minutes of prep time. Instead, they have us calling parents, attending meetings and other duties. We have to prepare six lessons a day. That 45 minutes is not a break, it’s work. If we don’t get that, it means we have to do all our prep at home and not get paid for it, or else not prepare at all. How can children get the education they need if we don’t have the time to prepare?

“They also don’t pay us on time for the supplemental work we do. We can’t delay getting report cards in to them.”

“We can’t delay paying our bills either,” said Martha, another Downtown High School teacher.

Bryan, a high school teacher with 16 years in the district, said, “There hasn’t been any real improvements since I hired in. We’ve had high stakes testing, and conditions in the schools have not gotten any better.

“After the 2008 financial crash, they put a freeze on our

raises, reduced contributions to our pensions and split the insurance. Those hired before 2009 got one medical plan, and teachers hired after had to pay higher out-of-pocket rates for family coverage.”

He told Lehman, “Inequality is a very big issue. The schools in the poorest areas like Linden and Hilltop are in deplorable condition. In areas being super-gentrified like Clintonville, the schools have far more resources. It is not a matter of race. Poor is poor.”

Like other cities in the industrial Midwest, Columbus has been ravaged by plant closings and deindustrialization. In 2007, General Motors shut down its Delphi parts plant, which once employed over 5,000 workers. The Hilltop neighborhood, formerly the home of many workers at the GM plant and the also shuttered Westinghouse refrigerator plant, is now one of the poorest in the city.

Meanwhile state, city and district officials have showered tax abatements on Columbus-based corporations like Fortune 500 companies Nationwide, Cardinal Health, American Electric Power, L Brands, Alliance Data and Huntington Bancshares.

“They give these big corporations 10-year tax abatements, and that money comes directly out of our kids’ mouths,” said Traci, the veteran high school teacher.

Earlier in the day Will Lehman had spoken to Stellantis (Chrysler) Jeep workers in Toledo about the need to fight the growing wave of layoffs in the auto industry.

After spending the day on the picket lines with teachers in Columbus, he told the WSWS, “I’ve seen the impact of plant closings and layoffs by GM and other corporations on cities like Flint, Detroit and Columbus. School systems are destroyed, neighborhoods collapse, lives are cut short. All the while the corporations are making more profits than ever.

“The Columbus teachers are taking a stand for all workers. They need the support of all workers to win.”



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