

Exchange with a railroad worker and Will Lehman, socialist candidate for UAW president: How to build rank-and-file committees

Will Lehman
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Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks workers and candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, received the following letter from a railroad worker. Lehman is running on a platform of abolishing the UAW apparatus and to build workers' power through rank-and-file committees. The exchange has been edited to protect the worker's identity.

Railroaders have been without a new contract for nearly three years. They are incensed as the recent report issued by the Biden-appointed Presidential Emergency Board, which proposes a settlement favorable to the railroads on virtually all points. There is overwhelming sentiment among railroaders for strike action, but also frustration and anger with the rail unions for urging Biden to appoint the PEB. The unions are now in damage control mode since the report has been released. This is contributing to a growing interest among railroaders in building up rank-and-file committees in order to oppose both the railroads as well as the union bureaucracy.

The WSWs has endorsed Lehman's campaign. For more information on Will Lehman's campaign, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.

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Hi Will,

I'm a locomotive engineer on a Class I railroad in the US. I keep hearing about creating rank-and-file groups independent of our unions. I'm interested in doing this in my area but I don't really know much about how to make it happen.

I guess I don't know how or where to begin. I could organize a group to start a local rank-and-file group

but beyond that I'm not sure where to go with it. What authority would we have, and what would be any of the legalities involved? I would be very interested in some literature to study up on or any direction you could give. Thanks.

Will: The purpose of a rank-and-file committee is to organize workers themselves as an independent power, to prepare them to fight against not only the company, but also the pro-corporate union apparatus, and to fight against the bureaucratic strangling of the workers' struggle. In the case of the railroads, I understand the desire for strike action is overwhelming. The problem, however, lies in the fact that the rail unions—the BLET, SMART-TD, etc.—are redirecting everything towards the provisions of the RLA, aggressively enforcing anti-strike injunctions, promoting illusions in the government as a “neutral arbiter.” This has all been exposed by the PEB ruling, and now railroaders are fed up.

My understanding is that you will be able to legally strike as soon as September 15. But you should first of all not assume that just because you and your coworkers are unanimously in favor a strike that the unions will call one. They are creatures of the corporations and of the state. They will do everything they can to prevent a strike from breaking out, because that is what the railroads' shareholders and the Biden administration want them to do. And if a strike takes place then, or perhaps even before, Congress will likely try to intervene.

Railroaders have powerful enemies, but railroaders are more powerful. As you know, a railroad strike

would shut down the entire country. It would also receive enormous support from all of us in the working class, who would take it as the signal to press for our own demands, where we are also dealing with runaway inflation and insane overwork. The problem, however, is that railroaders do not have an organization which they control and which genuinely represents them. Hence the need for forming and building rank-and-file committees.

Now to your question, how does one build a committee? A committee will naturally have to strive to expand to include participation across all the Class I railroads and be seen by at least a decisive section of the railroaders as their organization, their leadership. But you shouldn't feel that you have to wait for that level of support to found it. If you have spoken to even one or two of your coworkers and they are in agreement with the need to start a committee, then you have the foundation of a committee.

The power of the committee comes, in the first place, from the fact that it is the only group that has a viable strategy for workers and is the only group that expresses the deeply felt opposition of workers and gives it an articulate form. You can then move onto a founding statement, which my campaign can help you with writing and publishing anonymously so you can then distribute it as widely as possible, explaining what the committee is, why it has been founded, and what it fights for. What is its strategy, and what are its demands? On the basis of this founding program, you can begin the work of expanding the influence and the membership of the committee.

To see what committees look like in practice, I would urge you to review the Volvo Trucks strike in Dublin, Virginia last year. The rank-and-file committee there played a decisive role in mobilizing opposition to multiple sellout contracts brought by the United Auto Workers and forcing the union to call a strike. It also, by the way, had a huge impact on me. I first founded the rank-and-file committee at my plant in Mack Trucks in support of the strike.

One last thing – You asked about the legal status of committees. First let me assure you that the rank-and-file committee is completely legal, protected under the First Amendment protection of free speech. But the union bureaucracy does not recognize freedom of speech. Therefore you should take measures,

particularly in the early stages of the committee, to protect the identity of its members as a safeguard against retaliation.

The union will do everything they can to try to intimidate workers from joining the committee, including lying about the union's legal status. They will also claim, falsely, that membership in a committee is incompatible with membership in the union, since the committee constitutes an alternative bargaining agent, but as you are the dues paying members this is false. The purpose of the committee is to put the rank-and-file in charge. Union officials never tire, in order to cover their own tracks, of claiming that "the membership is the union." But their response to rank-and-file committees shows that in reality, they see themselves, the bureaucracy, as the union, not the members. Their response to the rank-and-file committee will show exactly why rank-and-file committees are needed in the first place!

Thank you for reaching out,

Will

[Editor's note: Workers can find more information about rank-and-file committees by visiting WSWS.org/workers. We are also including a selection of major statements of rank-and-file committees published in the WSWS in the "read more" section below.]



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