

“Unless people take a stand, nothing will ever change”: Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia back Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president

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The World Socialist Web Site has endorsed Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president. For more information and to get involved, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.

Last Friday, United Auto Workers (UAW) presidential candidate Will Lehman met with Volvo Trucks workers from the New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia. The workers came to a “meet and greet” event with the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, which was held at the local county park near the NRV plant.

Lehman visited southwestern Virginia on the last day of his campaign tour of auto plants in Michigan, Ohio and Kentucky.

After the meeting in Dublin, an NRV worker sent the following statement urging workers to support Will Lehman’s campaign.

I started talking to Will last year during Volvo’s strike. He started a committee trying to build solidarity amongst the Mack workers to help us with the strike. I am glad I got the chance to meet Will Lehman when he visited the NRV this past Saturday. It was good to finally be able to meet him in person.

From talking to him over the past year I know he is someone that actually cares about the workers and can hopefully bring an end to the corruption that has plagued and still plagues the UAW. Even though I am no longer a member, I spent 25 years paying union dues and complained about the issues within the UAW. Almost every member that I have come in contact with has complained about the very same issues. Then year after year no one does anything to change anything. The feds roll in and put another and another high-up UAW official in prison for embezzlement. Then contract after contract we get sold out by the union. The local union reps talk about how the International goes into closed-door negotiations without their knowledge, then tells them they have to take this contract back to be voted on. When you have these backdoor deals, you know this is corrupt and is completely unacceptable.

Now we have someone that is running against this corruption and putting the power back in the workers’ hands, and of course he is being met with animosity from not only the higher-ups in the UAW but also the same people that complain about this very issue. This is the very reason why where I work at, everyone has had enough of the union lies and want nothing to do with them.

Unless people start saying enough is enough and take a stand nothing will ever change. It’s only going to get worse. When companies are profiting in the billions each quarter, then when it comes to contract time or raise time, they always say we are broke. While the CEOs and the top investors keep getting richer with multimillion-dollar bonuses, the workers have to scrape by wondering can I save money for my child’s education or buy groceries and gas. And our union reps come to you after another piss-poor contract and say, ‘We will get it next time.’

After 25 years of hearing that, I can’t stand by anymore. Even though Will and I don’t see eye to eye on political affiliation, we most definitely agree that workers are being trampled on, and these rank-and-file committees are the way to hold these officials accountable and bring in the change that is needed. We can’t keep sitting back being the backbone of these corporations and watch only the top elite bask in the billion-dollar profits while our wages have stagnated, and inflation is soaring.

The day of working towards and looking forward to our golden years has now vanished, with corporations stealing from the pension plans or eliminating them altogether and replacing them with 401(k)s. Of course, our politicians are trying to figure out how to steal those from us now also. This leaves our elderly having to pick between paying for food or for prescriptions to keep alive.

Take a stand and vote for Will Lehman.

Three thousand workers at the NRV plant mounted a nearly three-month struggle against the Sweden-based truck manufacturer last

year. Among the workers who met with Lehman were members of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC), which led the fight against the sellout contracts pushed by Ray Curry, then the head of the UAW Heavy Trucks division and current UAW International president.

During that fight, the VWRFC fought to break the isolation by the UAW bureaucracy of the five-week strike, reaching out to workers throughout the auto industry, along with fellow Volvo workers in Belgium.

The formation of the VWRFC inspired Lehman and other workers at the Volvo-owned Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania to form a rank-and-file committee of their own. The Mack Trucks workers committee called for a ban on handling scab parts from the strikebound NRV plant and for an expansion of the strike. After workers rejected three UAW-backed sellout agreements, the first two by 90 percent or more, the UAW rammed through the company's "last, best and final" offer, claiming the deal passed by 17 votes.

Lehman met with one of the leaders of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, who issued the statement above. Lehman said: "Your campaign, had that not happened, had you not formed a rank-and-file committee, had someone not sent me the info about your committee, I wouldn't be here today. I would be basically minding my own business and losing more money on Mack Trucks' floor and trying to talk to workers there.

"Your strike was a major radicalizing event for workers, including at Mack. Now workers are talking about our contract in 2023. I tell them you have to reach out and lend a hand if you expect to get a hand back. It would have been the best way for Volvo and Mack workers, if we went out too, and other plants too, if we could have tied it to Swedish workers at Volvo. That is coming as well.

"If you would have had full strike pay. If you had the backing of other plants, where workers decide, 'Yeah, are going to shut this down,' it would have been a totally different fight. That's what I'm trying to fight."

"Yes, that's the fight that we really need to be on a fight," the worker replied. "When I was in the union hall, me and some of the other guys were saying we were fighting for COLA (Cost of Living Adjustments). The union officials thought that was the dumbest thing in the world. 'You'll lose money by getting COLA,' they claimed. I said back then they are already forecasting 7 percent inflation rates in the next year. Well, we got it and more."

"Your whole committee was a very large part of that," Lehman replied. "That was tipping something much bigger off. Do we realize how many people read your statements, how many learned from it? I guarantee workers from Mack did. That's what has to be built, a working-class movement. Workers are responding very positively to it. And it's basically because of how much they've lost over the years. They're recognizing it now."

"During the strike," the NRV worker said, "Me and other committee members would put WSWS papers on the table and workers would say, 'They're on point.' I guarantee that was one of the main reasons that our strike lasted as long it is did. I feel like our movement that we got started here during the strike is what did

it. It also inspired the John Deere workers, and they got COLA."

"I've said to workers, 'You too can start a rank-and-file committee,'" Will responded. "Getting that thought out there that it is possible. A railway worker asked me, 'How can I start a committee?' So, it is crossing the industries. A guy from Australia who chopped trees for a living contacted me. Workers in the UAW in Puerto Rico called me. There are struggles all over the world. In Sri Lanka, they kicked the president out of his palace. That could be us. Everyone has to be pointed in the right direction and have the right program.

"This campaign is uncovering many workers who are open to socialism, what I'm talking about workers' power, not just bending the knee to capitalism and licking the boot. That's all these UAW bureaucrats know how to do."

Lehman said he had spoken to striking teachers in Columbus, Ohio who were told there was no money to improve their ventilation systems, lower class sizes or fix dilapidated schools. But Biden had found billions for the war against Russia. "I've spoken to workers on this tour, and I ask them: 'Do you have a problem with the workers in Ukraine? Do you have any problems with the workers in Russia?' Why is there a war being waged over there? The US government has been shipping weapons over there for years. Why are we funding that? I tell workers, 'They are going to drag us into this. They are going to get your kids dragged into this.'"

"At least with the Iraq War," the NRV worker who had been sent to fight in the Middle East said, "they came up with the excuse about 'weapons of mass destruction.' They haven't made any excuse to wage war against the Russians," he said, adding, "but it's not the boogeyman in Russia that is taking away our pay and vacation time."

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