Why UAW university employees should vote for Will Lehman for UAW president

Will Lehman
6 September 2022

The following statement was issued by United Auto Workers presidential candidate Will Lehman to graduate student workers and other university employees in the UAW. The WSWS has endorsed Lehman's campaign. For more information, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.

On Sunday, September 11 at 2 p.m. Eastern, Lehman will be hosting a live discussion about his campaign on Zoom. Learn more and register here.

Dear university employees,

My name is William Lehman. I am a 34-year-old second-tier autoworker at the Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, and I am running for president of the United Auto Workers union. I want to explain to the more-than 100,000 university employees in the UAW why I am running for president and ask for your vote.

My campaign is fighting to mobilize the UAW membership and the entire working class in a struggle to reverse decades of attacks on our living standards by the corporations.

A serious fight against the corporations, however, requires taking power from the pro-corporate UAW apparatus (which has total assets over $1 billion, and a yearly payroll of $75 million) and returning it to the workers. This requires the development of a network of rank-and-file committees on the shop floor to fight for our interests.

At the same time, my campaign is bringing a socialist and internationalist program to workers in the UAW and beyond. All the great problems we confront—unprecedented levels of social inequality, an escalating global war, the danger of fascism and dictatorship, environmental degradation—require the mobilization of the entire working class against capitalism.

We are holding direct elections for the UAW leadership this year because a large number of officials were convicted for stealing our dues money or accepting bribes from the corporations. The corruption scandal was not about a few "bad" leaders. It exposed the rot at the core of the entire bureaucratic level.

Whether we work in auto plants or classrooms, we all confront the impact of decades of pro-corporate betrayals by the UAW bureaucracy. As we face more and more hardship, corporate profits grow, university endowments increase, and the corporate and union executives get richer and richer.

The cost of living is hitting university employees and graduate students especially hard. Many of you live in Washington state, California, and New York, where it is nearly impossible to get by on a graduate student salary. The UAW just agreed to contracts at Columbia University and New York University with raises of 3 percent a year. With annual inflation running between 8-9 percent, this amounts to a huge pay cut, especially for workers in one of the world's most expensive cities!

The same is true everywhere. When workers in the UAW go on strike—always after rejecting contracts that the UAW apparatus sought to ram through—we are isolated and strung out on poverty-level strike pay. When graduate students in the UAW went on strike at Harvard, Columbia and NYU in 2021, the UAW did nothing to even inform autoworkers, let alone mobilize us to support you. The same is true when auto and other manufacturing workers go on strike.

The UAW has become a union in name only. Many of you are new to the UAW, though you have already had important experiences with how the apparatus operates. I can tell you that if you go out to an auto plant and speak to workers, the constant refrain is: "The UAW is a business." It serves to enforce the demands of the companies. It is dominated by an apparatus, including more than 450 officials who make over $100,000, that profits off our labor.

But we must also recognize that the operations of the

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UAW apparatus are bound up with its support for capitalism and its nationalist perspective.

Eastern Pennsylvania, where I live and work, used to be one of the world's most productive regions in terms of industrial activity, and workers experienced some of the highest living standards here. This wasn't because the companies were generous—workers waged powerful and often violent strikes, including the famous Bethlehem Steel strike of 1941, and won the right to fully paid pensions, better wages and necessary safety standards.

For the past four decades, however, the UAW and other unions have presided over the destruction of our living conditions. Plants were shut down, wages were slashed, and lives were ruined because the union officials told workers they had to accept cuts to compete with workers in other countries. This has happened throughout the industrial centers of the country. Democrats and Republicans changed positions at local, state and federal level, but conditions only get worse.

This is why I am running on a socialist platform. American capitalist society is in a state of collapse. The Biden administration is continuing the Trump administration's COVID policies, as thousands and thousands die, with hardly any mention in the media. Trump and the Republicans continue their fascist plotting against democracy. The Democratic Party is leading a war against Russia and China, bringing the world closer to nuclear war than any point since the Cuban Missile Crisis, and wasting billions on weapons. The environmental catastrophe is nearing the point of no return. Three billionaires possess as much wealth as the poorest half of the population.

I just travelled the country to campaign at auto plants in Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and Virginia, where I talked to autoworkers about socialism. I tell my coworkers that socialism means that the working class must control society's wealth, since we produce it. It means that the world economy must be run to meet human need, not corporate profit. It means that the working class must democratically control society. It means building a political movement independent of both the Republican and Democratic parties.

I am receiving extraordinary support from workers across the country for this program. Even many workers who voted for Trump agree with this. To those of you who do not come from working class backgrounds, you must understand that it is both necessary and possible to build a socialist movement in the American working class.

There is also a powerful response from workers to an internationalist perspective. My campaign is about uniting workers throughout the world in defense of our common class interests. Many graduate students come from outside the United States, and you will recognize that the conditions workers confront here are the same as those faced by workers in every country.

I am opposed to all forms of nationalism. I specifically condemn and reject the anti-Chinese xenophobia that has been promoted throughout the pandemic by the corporate establishment and media, and is being used to lay the groundwork for war.

There are a lot of misconceptions about the working class at the universities. There are those in the more affluent sections of the population who think that workers, especially white workers, are "privileged," backwards, racist and right-wing. Some people who believe these myths even call themselves "socialists," though it has nothing to do with left-wing politics.

In the real world, workers of every race, gender and sexual orientation are heavily exploited and are looking for a way to unite and fight together. The politics of racial and gender identity are a tool of the corporations to pit us against each other and divide us. We are fighting not for privileges, but for equality.

To those of you on the campuses who are interested in genuine socialism: Orient your political activity to the working class, challenge the domination of postmodernism and identity politics in your university departments, and fight for the unity of the working class regardless of race or gender. That is what the working class wants, and that is what my campaign is fighting for.

I am asking you to vote for me and to join the fight to build a mass socialist movement today.

Sincerely,

Will Lehman

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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