Caterpillar workers voice support for Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president: "The main issue for me is equality"

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The WSWS has endorsed Lehman's campaign. For more information, visit WillforUAWpresident.org.

Work at Caterpillar? Tell us what your working conditions are like, what you think of the UAW bureaucracy, and what you think workers should be fighting for.

Supporters of Will Lehman, candidate for president of the United Auto Workers union, campaigned at several Illinois factories owned by global construction maker Caterpillar over the weekend, speaking with workers about his call to bring power to the shop floor.

On Friday, Lehman, a second-tier Mack Trucks worker from Macungie, Pennsylvania, issued a letter to Caterpillar workers, explaining his campaign and urging them to form rank-and-file factory committees to link up with John Deere, CNH and autoworkers.

"My campaign is not aimed at 'reforming' the corrupt, pro-corporate UAW apparatus," Lehman wrote in the letter, "but abolishing this apparatus and placing power in the hands of workers ourselves."

Lehman continued, "In the 1990s, the two strikes at Caterpillar, despite the immense determination and heroism of workers, were sabotaged and sold out by the UAW bureaucracy. The result was a historic decline in CAT workers' living standards and working conditions. What followed was the wage and benefit tier system, frozen pay for senior workers, the loss of pensions and COLA, rising health care costs, and the closure of countless plants and widespread destruction of jobs."

Peoria, located in central Illinois, has long been associated with the global construction equipment giant, which maintained its headquarters in the city until 2017. While the area has suffered heavily from decades of deindustrialization and plant closures, there remains a large concentration of Caterpillar's industrial operations, with thousands of workers at tractor assembly and engine works, a foundry, a global parts distribution center and other facilities.

A worker at the Caterpillar Mapleton Foundry, when asked what he thought workers needed, pointed to a leaflet with Lehman's letter to Caterpillar workers and said, "It's basically everything he's got right here, from what I understand."

Like a number of senior workers, he said his wages have been virtually frozen since the 2000s. "I haven't liked it since 2005, because of the division they put in. I've been topped out in my pay since 2007. I finally just got a 29 or 32 cent raise two or three weeks ago."

"The two-tier wage system needs to go. Health premiums need to come down. I would really love to see COLA come back. Everybody thinks you make good money working here, but with the price of everything, it don't matter. We need to be treated a lot better."

Many workers at the Mapleton foundry spoke about the tragic and horrific death earlier this year of Steven Dierkes, who died after falling into a crucible with molten iron. "I did not know Steven, but they know what happened," another worker said, referring to the company and the UAW. "The feeling to me was they put him in a spot that needed to be filled even though he wasn't in great physical condition to do what they were telling him to do. From what we've gathered, as workers, there's a video of what happened because there's video of that area 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but we have not yet seen it."

He said that adequate safety has gone by the wayside as the company seeks to rapidly fill empty positions. "They have people in this building who are still training, *doing* the training for other people. They bring people in by truckloads for Walk-In Wednesdays, and if they need employees then they need employees, but the thing is that they're just not fitting people to the positions that they should be in."

The company, with the tacit support of the UAW, has sought to evade any admission of wrongdoing in creating the conditions which allowed Dierkes' death to occur. Instead, they have sought to shift responsibility—and blame—for workplace safety or lack thereof entirely onto individual

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workers, with signs outside the foundry cynically declaring to workers that "safety is in your hands" and admonishing, "Don't learn safety by accident."

Dierkes, however, was the second death in just six months at the facility. A maintenance worker said he performed CPR on the dying 50-year-old Scott Adams, a contractor who fell to his death at the foundry in December 2021.

"Scott died two days before Christmas," the worker said. "But he fell through the hole in the floor, where he stepped off the ladder and stepped on some plywood and fell to the pit. I did CPR on him. He was alive when we found him. I knew him, he worked for Schaefer Electric. And then I don't know what happened with Steven Dierkes' death. It was horrible with both."

In addition to safety issues, the worker spoke out against the concessions the UAW has given up for decades at Caterpillar. "Going into the contract next year, we need to get rid of the tiers," he said in agreement with Will Lehman's demands. "I started up two-tier. It's BS. Equal pay for equal work. I would love to see the pensions come back too. Our COLA was negotiated away to keep retirees' health insurance. That was a concession. Now retirees are playing $700 a month just to keep their health insurance? So retirees on a fixed income are still getting screwed. We're all going to be there if we don't fight for them too."

"I'm sure that the union's being paid off"

Other Caterpillar workers denounced the years-long collusion between management and the UAW apparatus.

A worker with five years summed up his working conditions at the CAT plant in East Peoria. "It sucks! That's for both the management and the union. Both of them don't give a s***. The union is not with the workers."

Another worker said that he didn't feel that the UAW represented workers. "Not with the amount of money they're paid. This corporation makes billions of dollars a year and all the profits go back to the shareholders. We don't get paid enough and the union doesn't do anything about that. I can pay my bills and that's all. That two-tier wage is bull."

"We pay into the UAW with our dues and we see how much comes out of our checks for them, and that BS," the other worker said. "The problem is they have too much money," referring to the bureaucrats in control of the UAW. "The higher up they go, the more money they have."

Both workers expressed interest in learning more about Lehman's campaign and call to bring power to the rank and file. "I'm sure that the union's being paid off. Money talks," the worker continued. The other worker chimed in, "It's like if we go on strike the company will tell the union they're going to give them a few extra dollars to tell us all to go back to work, and then the union's going to say we need to go back to work. The little guy's always going to get the short end of the stick."

"In order to have rich, you must have the poor"

CAT workers also spoke out on broader social issues which Lehman's campaign is addressing, including the glaring inequality within capitalist society.

"The biggest thing for me is equality," said Jessie, a CAT worker in East Peoria.

Speaking about the conditions facing temporary workers, he said, "The supplemental thing was new to me. I don't think it's fair that a person should have to work from anywhere from six months to two years for [Caterpillar] to determine if they're good enough to work for the company.

After they've been hired as full-time employees, he said, "they have to wait another year to a year and a half before they can take a vacation. So you've got three years out of them with no vacation.

"We live in a world where 1 percent of population is the rich," he concluded. "In order to have rich, you must have the poor. If you don't have the poor, the rich don't exist. So best believe that that 1 percent is going to hold on to the riches by keeping you poor."

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