UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman comments on UAW Local 2320 contract negotiations with Heartland Alliance

Our reporters
13 September 2022

On Tuesday, UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman was asked by the negotiating committee of UAW Local 2320 to offer his views of ongoing negotiations between the local and the massive non-governmental organization Heartland Alliance in Chicago. The following email was distributed to the entire negotiating committee as the committee entered a negotiation session with management.

If you are a member of Local 2320 and wish to speak to Will Lehman about setting up a rank-and-file committee in your workplace, you can email his campaign at WillforUAWPresident@gmail.com.

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September 13, 2022

Local 2320 Negotiating Committee:

My name is Will Lehman, I am a 34-year-old rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania, and I am running for UAW president. I have been asked to give the negotiating committee of Local 2320 my thoughts on the current contract negotiations.

I fully support the workers of Local 2320 in Chicago in their struggle against Heartland Alliance. Management's proposal—a 3 percent wage increase each year for three years—is an insulting pay cut. Official inflation is nearing 10 percent and Chicago is one of America's most expensive cities. I understand that over half of the workers at Heartland Alliance make between $35,000 and $45,000 a year.

Management's claim that they can't afford to raise wages or hire more staff is a lie. I have been reviewing their financial statements, and the top 8 executives at this massive non-profit made a combined $1.9 million last year, and CEO Evelyn Diaz made nearly $375,000, or 10 times more than many workers she employs.

Nor is management in dire economic straits. According to financial filings, Heartland doubled its cash on hand from $3.5 million to $7 million from July 2020 to 2021, a year during which workers at Heartland were getting sick and dying of COVID because they were sent back to work without protection from the pandemic. As its workers were suffering, Heartland increased its assets over that time from $43.9 million to $60 million. If the value of this increase over just one year was given evenly to 550 workers who run their programs and services, each worker would get $30,000. From 2016 to 2020, the total amount Heartland gets from government grants increased 285 percent, from $13.1 million to $37.4 million, even as workers' wages stagnated.

If you review the financial records of the parent group "Heartland Alliance, Inc.," you will learn the organization's total grants increased from $99.9 million to $109.5 million in fiscal year 2021. Total revenues increased over $11 million, from $163.2 million to $174.8 million. Its net assets increased by $7.5 million over that year. Rental income alone increased over that period from $10 million to $12.6 million. Interest from investments increased from $1.3 million to $3.2 million. All of this money is going somewhere, and it's not going to the workers who make Heartland run. The bottom line is that management can afford massive pay increases.

I have spoken to workers in your local who have expressed anger over the fact that their contract expired in June, but the UAW has forced workers to remain on the job for three months. This is nothing but a big gift for management. The saying used to be "no contract, no work!" Now the UAW has turned this into "No contract, no problem!" But it is a problem for workers who have to keep working under the old contract, signed by Jose Lozano, which is so unfavorable to workers that it helped management make massive amounts of money as outlined

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above. I reviewed the last contract, and it's my understanding that the UAW agreed to have workers paid under $16 an hour, which is about at the level of Chicago's minimum wage law.

The UAW's counterproposal does not even begin to address workers' needs. A $4,500 pay raise the first year, and then 5 percent in years three and four means a worker making $40,000 will see their income go up to $44,500 in the first year, about equal to the inflation rate of 10 percent. Then the next two years they will take a 5 percent pay *cut* as the cost of living continues to spiral out of control, meaning the cuts of years two and three will totally erase the increase in year one. This proposal was apparently reached by a majority of 10 to 3 on your committee, and I doubt the pay cuts in years two and three have been explained to the membership. It does not seem that much "negotiation" is taking place in these meetings with management, since there are two proposals that benefit management and none that benefits workers.

I also hear from workers that they are being told the International does not want to strike. The only reasons for this are: one, the UAW does not want to ruin its cozy relationship with management and, two, the UAW wants to keep ahold of the wealth in the $800 million-plus strike fund, instead of giving strike pay to workers. This is why the UAW convention in July voted to raise UAW leadership salaries while also voting to reduce strike pay from $500 a week to $400.

The UAW has over $1 billion in assets and expends $75 million a year on the salaries of the executives at UAW but almost nothing on strike pay. There are 450 UAW officials who make over $100,000 a year, not counting benefits. Local 2320 also increased its cash on hand from $2.9 million to $3.7 million from April 2021 to April 2022. Local 2320 receives $4.7 million in dues each year, and spent $0 on strike pay. Instead, it spends $600,000 of workers' dues money paying the salaries of the six best paid officials in the local who make $100,000 each, including Pamela Smith, Joseph Veehoff, Donis Borks, Laura Hebert, Jose Lozano and Rachel Thomas.

Rank-and-file workers need to be the ones making decisions in negotiations with management. I propose you take the following actions immediately:

1. Revoke the latest offer and call a mass meeting of the entire local to discuss the workers' demands in the contract.

2. Call a strike vote at the meeting with a deadline in the near future.

3. Hold an election to select 5 rank-and-file workers to participate in all future negotiation sessions and to report directly on developments to the membership as a whole.

4. Write to the International demanding it provide Local 2320 with sufficient money to pay all striking workers full pay for the duration of any strike.

This appeal is not directed to the bureaucracy, but to the workers in Local 2320 who have to fight because of the conditions they confront, working in extremely difficult jobs providing necessary social support to the unemployed, to youth and other sections of the working class.

I am running for president to return power to rank-and-file workers like the members of this local, and also to mobilize the entire working class against inequality, poverty, and decades of attacks by both the Democratic and Republican parties on workers' living conditions. I am also a socialist, and I believe a mass movement has to be built to unite workers all over the world in a fight against the source of inequality: the capitalist system.

The members of Local 2320 understand all too well from what they experience every day that decades of Democratic Party rule have done nothing to improve the conditions of workers no matter what color their skin is. These are workers who provide absolutely necessary care for young people, the unemployed, immigrants and other sections of the working class.

Meanwhile along the city's Gold Coast the rich have hoarded billions of dollars which should be expropriated and put to use meeting human need. This includes the wealth of billionaire Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, who the AFL-CIO endorsed. By taking up a fight and appealing to workers across the UAW and all industries, the workers of this local can help build a movement to bring about a just and equal world free of corporate exploitation.

Regards,
Will Lehman

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