

“The bills don’t stop when you’re off work”: Detroit autoworkers back Will Lehman’s fight to defend jobs and abolish tiers

Jerry White, Sheila Brehm
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In recent days supporters of Will Lehman have been regularly campaigning for the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for United Auto Workers president at factories in the Detroit area. Campaigners have gotten an enthusiastic response from hundreds of workers at plants owned by Chrysler (Stellantis), Ford and parts makers Dakota and Flex-N-Gate.

Frightened by the growing support for Lehman, the UAW apparatus is doing everything it can to suppress the turnout for the first direct election of top UAW officials by union members in seven decades. The International UAW leadership, headed by incumbent president Ray Curry, has done as little as possible to inform workers about the upcoming vote. In a revealing experience at Ford’s Michigan Assembly Plant, several younger workers told campaigners they were not aware of the election or did not know they could participate in it. In mid-October ballots are being mailed out to active and retired members, which must be returned by November 28.

At the factory gates, supporters passed out thousands of leaflets, titled “Power to the Rank-and-File,” explaining that Lehman’s campaign is “aimed at spearheading a mass movement of the rank-and-file to break the dictatorship of the apparatus and to transfer power and control over all decision-making to the rank-and-file in the auto plants and all work locations.” The statement outlines Will’s demands, including a 50 percent wage increase for all, the restoration of COLA, the abolition of the tier system, the conversion of temps to full-timers, full pensions for retirees and no plant closures and layoffs.

The call for action against the attack on jobs particularly reverberated among Stellantis workers at the Trenton Engine and Warren Stamping plants, where the company is slashing hundreds of jobs.

Trenton Engine

Last Thursday, 250 workers were laid off from the engine plant complex, which is located 30 miles south of Detroit and employs more than 1,300 hourly workers. First and second shift workers from assembly, machining, and maintenance were given no notice until the actual layoff last Thursday, and it is not clear whether the layoffs are temporary or permanent.

One worker who stopped to talk with campaigners said, “Most workers here have no respect for the union, we don’t have much faith in it. If you speak out, there are repercussions. So many keep their mouths shut. What I see in Will Lehman is he is saying to the rank and file, we have to stand up. I agree with that.”

A worker with nine years seniority told the WSWS a week after meeting the campaign team, “I came in on my second shift Thursday and was told I’d be off for a week. No reason was given, we had no advance notice. Nothing. Then on Friday I got a robocall at 4:00 from management. The union is nowhere to be found. It’s time to clean house! Everybody’s in bed together—the company and the UAW. We don’t have a union. We get no information from the union about COVID, about the threat of layoffs coming, we hear nothing from them,” said the worker.

The latest layoff is part of ongoing layoffs at the plant over the last two years. Another worker described the insecure job situation. “I’ve been laid off one month of this year so far—in addition to the present week off. Last year I was laid off for six months. I received about \$725 of unemployment every two weeks and around \$250 of SUB pay every week. That comes to only \$612 a week compared to \$1,000 a week. That’s why so many workers at the plant are working two jobs. I’m thinking of doing that myself. It’s impossible like this. I support Will Lehman’s campaign because change is needed. The union officials who run everything care

nothing about the workers.”

Another worker reported to the WSWS that in addition to his job at Trenton Engine, he is also working as a driver for DoorDash. “I had to do this, because my pay is so uncertain, and the bills don’t stop when you’re off work.”

Many workers told the campaigners about their concerns of a permanent layoff which is planned for October and is expected to eliminate about 250 jobs. At the end of June, Stellantis announced it would “decommission” an engine line at Trenton Engine Complex into a “flexible line.” The conversion to electric vehicles will lead to the production of fewer internal combustion engines. The auto company announced it would invest \$24.7 million at the south plant and “repurpose” the north plant for warehousing and other non-manufacturing needs.

When the announcement was made last June, Cindy Estrada, UAW vice president and head of the Stellantis department, made clear that no fight would be waged to defend jobs. Applauding the corporation’s investment, which was enticed by promising tax cuts, incentives and abatements to Stellantis, she said, “the expected reduction in membership at local 372 is disappointing.”

A worker who has been at the plant for 10 years explained, “We heard the north plant is closing in October—but nothing definite is being said to us. We also don’t get informed about the COVID cases in the plant. From what I see COVID is not over. And now there’s monkeypox. I have a relative who works at Sterling Heights Assembly, and he shared articles with me, on monkeypox cases at his plant. We only get our news from other workers. We should be told by the union and management, but they won’t do it. I’m going to read over what Will Lehman is saying, because we have to do something ourselves.”

Warren Stamping

Forty workers, including 28 production and 12 skilled trades, were laid off on July 25 at Stellantis’ Warren Stamping Plant. The UAW has not even made a pretense of opposing job cuts, which have also occurred at the nearby Sterling Stamping Plant in June.

“There have been over 150 layoffs in the plant since 2021,” a veteran Warren Stamping worker told the WSWS. “They’ve done it incrementally. We got a letter from the local union president claiming all the laid off workers were placed in other plants. We don’t know if that is true, but the president said that meant the company could fill their spots with SEs [supplemental employees]. Before the SEs could

only work on Mondays and Fridays to fill in for absent workers.”

The auto companies, with the full backing of the UAW, are seeking to purge the workforce, particularly at the stamping plants, of more experienced, better-paid “legacy workers,” and replace them with low-paid at-will employees.

“The way the SEs are exploited must change,” a young temp at Warren Stamping said. “I agree with Will, we need our own committees in the factory to stand in solidarity with each other, SEs and full-timers. They can’t run this place without us. We get paid \$15.87 an hour and pay union dues, but we get no protection.”

At the Warren Truck plant next door, another SE said, “They treat us like dogs. They can force us to work 12 hours at any given time. We work full-time hours and get part-time wages and benefits. If I am going to work 40-60 hours a week, I should get full-time pay.

“I have to work two jobs to survive. I work at a parts plant making seats for Mustangs. Then I work here. It’s crazy—I work 80 hours a week and have no time to sleep. I pay UAW dues twice and get no representation for it. I agree with Will’s campaign.”

An SE at Toledo Jeep told the WSWS, “One of the biggest reasons I support Will is to get rid of the tier system, which they use as a divide-and-conquer tactic. This election is big. We’re going into a contract next year and things are going to get worse, not better. They are going to be asking for more concessions and are going to close plants.

“All the Big Three want to go to electric vehicles. If you look at Tesla, they pay their employees a lot less, they give them fewer benefits, and they use a lot fewer workers to build cars. That’s the model the Big Three is going after. If we don’t do something about this in this contract, it is not going to be just SEs who are going to lose their jobs, it will be full-time, seniority, everybody. That’s why I am going to vote for Will and do what I can to build rank-and-file committees.”



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