“I know about Will and think he’s the best candidate running”: Toledo Jeep workers welcome rank-and-file campaign for UAW president

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The WSWS has endorsed the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president. For more information, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.

Supporters of United Auto Workers presidential candidate Will Lehman won strong support from Toledo Jeep workers when a campaign team visited the Stellantis factory in northern Ohio Saturday afternoon. Although the UAW apparatus has done everything to keep information about the first-ever vote for the union’s top leadership well concealed, several workers at the factory were familiar with Lehman’s campaign and said they planned to vote for him when ballots go out next month.

One worker said, “The UAW International took bribes from the company to sign these rotten contracts, and we’ve never gotten anything back. The UAW officials just do what they are told by the bosses. I’m interested in Will’s campaign if he’s talking about workers having the power.”

“I know about Will and think he’s the best candidate running,” a worker with eight years in the factory said. Referring to the upcoming debate between UAW presidential candidates on September 22, he said, “I know Will supports full employer-paid pensions for everyone. But if Curry shows up, I would ask him and the other candidates: ‘Do you support pensions for everyone?’ There are guys in their 40s and 50s who are Tier Two, like my uncle, who aren’t going to get a pension. They did the work and had their bodies jacked up from standing on a cement floor all day, and they deserve a good pension.”

The worker, who spent four years as a so-called temporary part-time (TPT) employee before being converted to a full-time position, said, “When I was rolled over to full-time, my pay went down from $19.50 an hour to $17 an hour. Workers here are also angry about ‘leap-frogging.’ Part-timers who were rolled over in 2019 make $2 less an hour than those who were rolled over after 2020. Don’t get me wrong, everyone should be making the same, but the UAW has us divided against each other.”

Of particular concern for Toledo Jeep workers is the unrestrained exploitation of so-called Supplemental Employees (SEs), who make up one-third of the 6,000 employees at the giant Toledo Assembly Complex.

The UAW and the companies changed the designation of these workers from “temporary part-time employees” to SEs after it became obvious to everyone that they were neither “temporary” nor “part-time.” Instead, tens of thousands of SEs at Stellantis, Ford and GM plants have labored for five or more years before getting a chance to be converted to some substandard tier of full-time work. In the meantime, they are paid substandard wages and benefits and can be terminated virtually without cause. For the privilege of being treated as a pariah, they are forced to pay dues to the UAW.

“You call the UAW, and they tell you they can’t come for weeks,” one worker, who has been a supplemental employee for nearly four years, told campaigners. “The situation facing the SEs is horrible, and the UAW is not behind you,” another young worker said.

One young woman, an SE for three years, said, “The TPTs don’t get dental or vision coverage. I just spent $1,000 to take care of my kid’s cavities. I don’t go to the dentist myself because I can’t afford it. If my husband wasn’t working, there’s no way I could live on what I make here.”

The SEs alternate between not having enough hours to live on to working 10-hour shifts, six days a week. “We came into work last week, and they sent us home because of a parts shortage,” one worker said. SEs also do not qualify for supplemental unemployment benefits like full-time workers. “We were hired to work Monday, Fridays and Saturdays, but we’re barely getting the work. We’re paying union dues but getting none of the benefits.”

Another SE said she and others had been working six

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10-hour days every week to fill in for workers on summer vacation. When the summer ends, she said, she had no idea what her schedule would be.

"I read Will's program, and I like what he has to say about crossing the SEs over to full-time and increasing everybody's pay," another SE told campaigners. "All you hear from the UAW is 'We can't help you, it's in the contract.'"

An SE at the Jeep plant wrote a powerful letter to the WSWS explaining why he was supporting Will and planned to vote for him. The UAW leadership, by supporting two-tier wages and the abuse of part-timers, "has allowed the factories it represents to become a microcosm of American society, and the workers are anything but equal."

He was supporting Lehman because the Mack Trucks worker is fighting for the abolition of all tiers, the immediate conversion of all temporary workers to full-time status and an across-the-board 50 percent wage increase and cost-of-living protection for all workers. "This is why I'm voting for Will Lehman for international president," the worker wrote. "A vote for anyone else is a vote for more inequality in our workplace and more of the status quo."

Older workers have also not seen a wage increase in years due to the sellout contracts UAW officials signed in exchange for millions in bribes. Because of this, even older workers are forced to work two jobs to survive.

One worker who said he worked at the local Dana parts plant and the Toledo Jeep factory told campaigners that he only had time to "sleep about an hour and a half in my car" between jobs. "Things have been going backwards for workers. With this two-tier pay system, you have brothers and sisters working side by side, with one making half the wages for doing the same thing. Unity and equality is supposed to be the soul of the union, but they got us divided. I agree with Will about giving more power to the workers on the shop floor."

Another full-time worker told the WSWS, "I'm making the same thing that my brother was making here back in 1986." The worker said his father was a veteran of the 1984 AP Parts strike in Toledo. During the nearly 10-month strike, workers courageously resisted the wage-cutting demands of the GM parts supplier and fought back against strike-breaking injunctions, arrests and the violence of private thugs from the notorious "Nuckols Security" unionbusting firm, the Toledo Police Department and the Democratic Party. The UAW, which favored lowering the parts costs of GM and other Detroit automakers, deliberately isolated the struggle, leading to its defeat after 286 days.

After decades of declining real wages and eroding conditions, workers in Toledo and everywhere else are disgusted with the UAW and looking for a way to fight.

Campaigners spoke with Eric, a veteran worker who first worked at the original Toledo Jeep plant, nicknamed "The Cove," before coming to the new plant when it opened in 2000. Initially, thinking that campaigners for Will Lehman were hustling votes for another UAW bureaucrat, Eric was skeptical. He challenged the campaigners: "I don't want to hear anything about a candidate running for the UAW unless he is talking about more than the autoworkers," he said. "Otherwise, there is no point even voting in another election, nothing ever changes."

The campaigner replied that Will Lehman had just participated in a meeting of 500 railroad workers, who are engaged in a fight against the rail carriers, the Biden administration and the rail unions, and that he was fighting to mobilize the whole working class against capitalist exploitation. Lehman also visited the picket lines of striking teachers in Columbus, Ohio, the campaigner explained, and joined calls with German, Indian and Mexican autoworkers to fight for the unity of workers all over the world. Lehman was a socialist, he further explained, who was fighting to mobilize workers against the capitalist system.

The worker responded enthusiastically and signed up for more information on Lehman's campaign. "I like what he's fighting for. It's not just the UAW, it's the whole system that is against us. Railroad workers, nurses, teachers, we have to unite everyone. We are all part of the working class. It doesn't matter what creed or color you are, we are basically modern-day slaves. We have to educate ourselves. When autoworkers get together with other workers, that's what will cause a revolution."

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