

“Will wants to abolish the tier system. I say yes!”: Broad support for Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president at Ford Michigan Assembly

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

Volunteers for Will Lehman’s campaign for president of the United Auto Workers union encountered strong support among autoworkers at the afternoon shift change at Ford Michigan Assembly Plant (MAP) in Wayne, Michigan, just west of Detroit, on Friday.

Lehman, a second-tier worker at Mack Trucks in Pennsylvania, is calling for the construction of a mass movement of rank-and-file workers to abolish the corrupt bureaucracy that has dominated the union for decades.

To carry out a fight for what workers need—including the end of the tier system, the conversion of all temps to full-time status, a 50 percent wage increase, COLA raises to keep up with inflation, and more—Lehman is advocating for the organization of rank-and-file committees in every plant and workplace, linking up workers in an international network.

Michigan Assembly employs roughly 4,600 hourly workers and produces the hot-selling Bronco and Ranger light trucks. Many workers at shift change said they had learned about the campaign already and were in support of it. “I’m getting the texts, and I’m planning to vote for him,” was a common refrain.

Campaigners informed workers about the upcoming debate of candidates for UAW president scheduled to take place on Thursday, September 22, hosted by the court-appointed UAW monitor. The UAW apparatus has essentially sought to conceal from workers that the debate is even taking place, doing nothing to publicize it, with incumbent President Ray Curry and the bureaucracy he heads no doubt concerned about being challenged by a

rank-and-file worker in front of a wide audience.

Many workers spoke angrily about the series of concessions contracts going back as far as the Chrysler bankruptcy of 1979, when then-UAW President Douglas Fraser joined the board of directors of the corporation, marking the beginning of the union’s integration into corporate management.

Workers asked angrily in relation to the UAW’s long list of concessions given up to the companies, “Why did they take our pension away?” and “What about COLA?” Dozens who spoke to the campaign team welcomed the campaign’s call for an offensive to overturn decades of frozen wages, givebacks, forced overtime, plant closings, bankruptcies, job destruction and the general impoverishment of wide layers of the working class.

Those who spoke out were especially hostile to the wage and benefit tier system which was introduced in 2007 and then spread throughout the industry under the restructuring carried through by Obama, Biden and the Democrats two years later, when the wages of all new hires slashed in half.

“It took me eight years to get to top pay,” said Trina. “Will wants to abolish the tier system. I say yes! I’m going to vote for him. Give me my COLA back.”

Flo declared, “We are all in there together doing the same work. Why do we have tiers? They sold us down the river in 2007 when they took these concessions.”

“I don’t like the tier system,” declared Gene, who has 23 years at the plant. “I don’t think it’s fair. New hires come in here making the same thing they make at McDonald’s. How is that right?”

He voiced a deep suspicion toward the entire upper echelon of the union bureaucracy. “For the last two

contracts nobody voted for them,” he said. “Yet somehow they seemed to have passed.” In 2015 the national Ford-UAW contract appeared headed for defeat, before voting was rescheduled at Local 600, which includes the giant Ford Rouge complex. Workers at Rouge photographed and documented obvious voting irregularities and filed challenges to the vote with the UAW, to no avail.

Gene went on to discuss the struggle now raging on the railroads. “I wondered what happened with that contract. Biden is trying to force it on them,” he said. “That has to stop.” Reading a resolution by rank-and-file rail workers adopted on September 14, which states, “We will not accept any act by Congress that violates our democratic right to strike and imposes upon us a contract that we do not accept and has not been ratified by the rank and file,” he said, “I agree with this.”

Lisa transferred into MAP from Rawsonville and expressed dissatisfaction with the local representation provided by the UAW. “Our union people don’t fight for us,” she said.

With the UAW working with the companies to drive down wages to near-poverty levels, more and more workers have been forced to rely on overtime in order to make ends meet. Chaos in supply chains and parts shortages—ultimately a product of the ruling class’s disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic—have left workers alternating between grueling levels of overtime or not enough hours to pay their bills.

“They don’t let you do overtime when you want it,” she said. To make matters worse, there are times when workers are forced to work 50 hours a week and get paid straight time. When workers ask for an explanation, the union steward will say they don’t know, she said. Instead of finding an answer, they will dismiss workers and say, “I can’t handle that.” She concluded, “They are supposed to be for us. They are really not fighting for us.”



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