

In historic debate, UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman calls for abolition of union bureaucracy, power to the rank and file

WSWS Autoworkers Newsletter
22 September 2022

The World Socialist Web Site will have further coverage of the debate in the coming days. The full video can be accessed at WillforUAWpresident.org/debatelive and is also embedded below.

In a historic debate Thursday night, UAW presidential candidate and rank-and-file worker Will Lehman made a powerful case for his campaign to abolish the United Auto Workers bureaucracy and establish rank-and-file power on the shop floor.

The debate was moderated by former *New York Times* reporter Steven Greenhouse and organized by the court-appointed monitor overseeing the operations of the UAW following the massive corruption scandal. It included, in addition to Lehman, UAW President Ray Curry, longtime UAW bureaucrat Shawn Fain, Local 163 Shop Chairman Mark Gibson and Brian Keller.

In his opening statement, Lehman—a tiered worker at Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania—clearly established that his campaign is giving voice to and is directed at rank-and-file workers.

“The only reason there is an election,” he said, “is because the UAW’s leadership was convicted for taking bribes from the companies and selling us out. This isn’t a question of a few bad individuals but of the bureaucracy as a whole. The UAW bureaucracy is a part of management. There are 450 bureaucrats who make over \$100,000 in our dues money. The richest 15 UAW executives made a combined \$3 million just in 2021. Ray Curry alone has made \$2.7 million since 2004.”

It is necessary, he said, to “replace the rule of the apparatus with workers’ committees in each factory and workplace to build real rank-and-file power. It is the workers who must make the decisions and establish genuine workers’ democracy in our workplaces. This means transferring power from the unaccountable apparatus onto the shop floor, to fight for what we need, not what the UAW says the company wants.”

The debate largely took the form of efforts by the various representatives of the apparatus to defend themselves against Lehman, who combined a fight for rank-and-file power with a call for a socialist and internationalist perspective.

At one point in the debate, Greenhouse directed a question to Lehman, quoting from his campaign statement, which reads, “The UAW is a union in name only. Its leadership, including two past presidents, were convicted for robbing us of dues money and

selling us out in exchange for bribes from the corporations. This is not the case of ‘a few bad apples.’ The UAW bureaucracy is a subdivision of the companies, suppressing resistance to low pay and horrible working conditions. It doesn’t unite us.”

Greenhouse asked, “If you are elected UAW president, how will you work with that bureaucracy?”

Lehman replied: “I don’t intend to work with any of them. My pivot the entire time has been to workers on the factory floor, forming rank-and-file committees and making the decisions ourselves. I don’t intend to use the same bureaucratic methods that have sold us out for decades. ... My turn is to workers on the factory floor, to organize, because that is where all the power is.”

“[There are] two very distinct layers that we are talking about,” he added. “The bureaucrats here won’t like that, but I am not speaking to them. I am speaking to the workers, wherever they are, whatever industry they’re in: We need to reorganize society, based on human need, not the system of private profit, of bargaining with the companies and doing what the companies say they will allow. We need a system that works for us.”

In response, all the other candidates lined up to defend the apparatus. Keller declared that any effort to abolish the bureaucratic apparatus was “divisive.” Fain said he didn’t know how “anyone was going to come in and eliminate the entire bureaucracy.” Gibson declared that “we are here to unify and not divide.” Curry, the handpicked representative of the UAW apparatus, meekly sought to defend the “Administrative Caucus” that is mired in corruption while spouting nationalist rhetoric.

Lehman replied: “They try to divide us up, the working class, based on country. And that has seen nothing but losses for the working class. ... The only division that I am sowing is: Workers, not parasites.”

Following a statement from Fain, who was posturing as a reformer, that “we’ve had corruption in our ranks” which has set the union back, Lehman replied:

“Again, to all the workers listening, ‘we’ have not had corruption in ‘our ranks’ on the working shop floor. We have had zero corruption. It is the bureaucracy that has had corruption. It is the bureaucracy that is under the watch of a federal Monitor. ... We have been forced contracts that we hate. We have been divided up by the bureaucracy. ... The bureaucracy has given [everything] away while they maintain their comfortable positions. We are not

the same. The workers are different from the bureaucrats, and every worker needs to understand that they should have power directly in their hands.”

After this statement, both Curry and Fain declined to reply. “I’m good,” declared Fain.

In the course of the debate, Lehman made a powerful case for socialism. “I am a socialist,” Lehman said.

“What every worker needs to understand watching this is that we are the ones generating all the profit. Everyone else is just a parasite on that profit. All the bureaucrats, all the companies. We don’t need them. They need us. We are the ones in the factories, the nurses in the hospitals, the teachers in the schools, we are the ones that keep society moving. It is not the owners. It’s us, the working class, and we should be able to decide how we distribute that profit.”

In his concluding statement, Lehman summed up the issues confronting workers in the UAW and all workers. This statement, in full, declared:

Brothers and sisters, we must take power from the UAW bureaucracy into our own hands. These bureaucrats claim we need them, but we don’t need them at all. On the contrary, we need to abolish the bureaucracy in order to unlock the tremendous potential power we have as part of the international working class.

Ray Curry and Shawn Fain do have experience. They have experience making six figures in our dues money while they sell us out. In the years of the worst corruption, when the UAW leaders were taking bribes and buying each other luxury gifts with *our* dues money, *they* were there, *their* salaries kept increasing, *they* rose to the top of the trash heap. Ray Curry and the UAW opposed having direct elections in the first place! It makes me sick to my stomach to hear them claim their “experience” is a positive.

What about the experiences of the rank and file who are watching this debate? While Curry makes \$272,000 and Fain makes \$156,000, there are autoworkers who are homeless, who work two jobs because UAW wages are so low, who get hurt and sick and die at work because the UAW tells us the companies can do whatever they want. The companies are only able to do what they want because the UAW bureaucracy allows it. What about the experience of towns like Lordstown and Hamtramck, where the UAW has closed plants and ruined entire communities? What about the experience of retirees on fixed incomes, of TPTs [temporary part-time workers] who pay union dues but receive no benefits, of workers who get paid less to perform the same work as the people next to them on the line? These bureaucrats’ plan is to rob us all to enrich themselves and help the companies profit.

The entire working class has the power to change things, but we must take power ourselves. We must build rank-and-file committees in our workplaces to link up with one another and form an alternate power structure to fight for what we need. We must link our struggles with

autoworkers in Mexico, in Canada and across the world. We must fight alongside rail workers, teachers, nurses, steel workers and longshoremen—all sections of the working class exploited by the same network of corporations, who control both political parties and run the government under capitalism.

I am asking you to vote for me, but that’s not all I’m asking. I’m asking you to take a stand and help build this movement. Nobody is going to do it for us. If you agree with me, let me tell you: You are not alone. Workers everywhere want to fight. I am sticking my neck out running in this election, and I’m asking you to stand up and fight back. Don’t just do it for yourself, do it for your children and for your co-workers. With an international rank-and-file strategy we can unleash the power of the working class and change the course of history.

In the hours following the debate, workers have been sending in support for Lehman’s campaign. A GM worker in Flint, Michigan, said, “What a debate! Lehman killed it! They all early on kept trying to push the false notion that Will is basically opposed to the whole union and thus its working members. His responses were great in explaining the class layers and the parasitism of the bureaucracy.”

A worker at the Volvo Trucks New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia, the site of a historic strike last year that was shut down by the UAW apparatus, said, “Will kicked butt, Ol’ Ray [Curry] was lying his ass off. About the retirees, he literally said, ‘What can we do for them, they are retired, and the company won’t even talk to us about them?’ And he sits there and says he has got them more.”

A worker at Dana Corporation, where workers voted overwhelmingly to strike but had a sellout contract forced on them last year, said, “I got to watch some of the debate, and it was really amazing to see us workers get represented in that and for Will to really not let up on any of those guys.”

For more information on the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.



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