

The UAW presidential debate: A rank-and-file socialist confronts the apparatus

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Thursday's debate of candidates in the United Auto Workers (UAW) presidential election was a historic event for the working class in the US and internationally. For the first time, a rank-and-file auto worker, presidential candidate Will Lehman, was able to directly confront the union apparatus in a forum that has been viewed by more than 10,000 workers.

The debate revealed two irreconcilable positions.

Lehman spoke to and for hundreds of thousands of rank-and-file workers who are seeking a way forward to fight against intolerable working conditions, declining real wages and extreme exploitation that have been overseen by the UAW.

All the other candidates—UAW President Ray Curry, long time bureaucrat Shawn Fain, Local 163 Shop Chairman Mark Gibson, and Brian Keller—defended an apparatus that has overseen decades of concessions and functions as an instrument for the suppression of the class struggle. They insisted that any opposition to it is “divisive” and touted their “experience” within it. For them, the workers exist only as objects to be manipulated. (See, “In historic debate, UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman calls for abolition of union bureaucracy, power to the rank and file”)

In the course of the debate, Lehman advanced a clear strategy for workers, not only those in the UAW, but throughout the US and internationally.

First, he presented the case for the establishment of a new power structure: a network of rank-and-file committees through which the workers themselves will control their fate and unify their struggles.

In response to a question from moderator Steven Greenhouse, a former reporter for the *New York Times*, as to how he would work with the UAW bureaucracy if he was elected, Lehman declared, “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, again, is to workers on the factory floor, to organize, because that is where all the power is. The power is not in the bureaucracy.”

He added, “It is two very distinct layers that we're talking about. And the bureaucrats here won't like that, but I'm not speaking to them. I'm speaking to the workers, wherever they are, whatever industry they're in, and I'm telling them: We need to reorganize society to meet human need.”

In response to the declaration that the organization of rank-and-file workers is “divisive,” Lehman replied, “The only division that I am sowing is: Workers, not parasites.”

The theme of the social gulf separating rank-and-file workers from the bureaucracy was developed throughout the debate. Following a statement from Fain, who was posturing as a reformer, that “we've had corruption in our ranks” that has set the UAW back, Lehman replied, “‘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... 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.”

Throughout the debate, Lehman was the only candidate who could speak to the experiences of workers themselves—the experience of being strung out on the picket line, of being forced to accept contracts that they opposed, of working for poverty-level wages. He referred to individual workers who have died on the job or from COVID-19 after the UAW assisted the companies in reopening the plants in 2020. When Greenhouse asked what the other candidates were doing to increase the presence of women in the union leadership, Lehman spoke to the experiences of women workers, including one who had a miscarriage due to the horrible conditions

on the factory floor.

Second, he made a powerful call for the international unity of the working class. “The workers are the ones generating all the profits,” he said. “If we are all organized internationally, we can shut these companies down.”

Responding to the nationalist rhetoric of Curry and the other candidates, Lehman said, “My appeal... is to the international working class being united in rank-and-file committees and coordinating action internationally.”

In response to the effort of the corporations and the union to pit workers in different countries against each other, Lehman said, “What the UAW likes to do is wave the American flag and say ‘Only Made in USA,’ when that divides us. We need global unity to face multinational corporations, and it’s only going to come from workers organizing on the shop floor.”

Third, Lehman advanced a socialist and anti-capitalist perspective for workers throughout the world.

“I’m a socialist,” Lehman said. “I’m working to advance a workers’ agenda... They’re all capitalists. They are all going to work under what capitalism allows... Workers need workers’ organizations to carry out democratic control over the production of these facilities, in a manner that benefits human need, not private profit.” In opposition to the “madness” of the capitalist system, he said, “What we need is a planned economy, and we need worker control of that economy.”

In the course of the debate, Lehman denounced the Democrats and Republicans, opposed the massive diversion of funds toward war abroad, “including the present war against Russia, which risks nuclear catastrophe,” and indicted the ruling class for its response to the pandemic, which has resulted in the deaths of more than 20 million people, including one million in the United States alone.

Through the campaign of Will Lehman, workers are being exposed to positions and conceptions that have been systematically excluded by the political establishment and the media. It underscores the extent to which workers have been deprived of any access to a socialist perspective, precisely because such a perspective powerfully resonates with the experiences of workers themselves.

That the debate was even held was only due to the massive corruption and criminality of the UAW leadership. Following the arrest and prosecution of more than a dozen UAW executives, including two former presidents, a court-appointed Monitor oversaw a

referendum on direct elections, which passed despite the opposition of the apparatus.

By not publicizing the debate and the election, the UAW hopes to keep it confined to a conflict within the apparatus, with as few workers voting as possible. Despite this fact, more than 10,000 workers have watched it, with workers reporting that they viewed it on the line as they worked and have been discussing Lehman’s campaign.

The media, for its part, is attempting to ignore it. Outside of the *World Socialist Web Site*, only the *Detroit News* and *Free Press* have written on it, in cursory articles that give nothing of its real content. The *New York Times* has not written an article on the debate, even though its former lead labor reporter moderated the event.

The publications of the pseudo-left, including *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin*, both associated with the Democratic Socialists of America, have also not reported on the debate. *Labor Notes* has endorsed one of the candidates, Shawn Fain, who they are trying to promote as a reformer, and they do not want workers to watch an event that exposes Fain as a longtime apparatchik. These organizations are not socialist or left-wing. They are, in fact, part of the effort to suppress the class struggle.

The line-up in the debate revealed the broader relationship of political and class forces. On the one hand is the union apparatus, staffed by a substantial upper-middle class layer, which is an institution of the state and corporate management.

On the other hand, the campaign of Will Lehman articulates and gives expression to a growing rank-and-file movement striving to break free from the control of the apparatus. The campaign coincides with an explosive opposition of rail workers to the efforts of the unions and the Biden administration to force through a sellout agreement and a developing strike movement among health care workers, educators, service workers and other sections of the working class.

The debate was a major milestone in the campaign. It must become the basis for an intensified fight to make the campaign as widely known among workers as possible, and in the process build up the network of rank-and-file committees to organize and unify the struggles of workers in the US and throughout the world.



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