

“The UAW doesn’t fight for us”

Supporters of UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman campaign in Indiana

WSWS reporting team
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Supporters of United Auto Workers presidential candidate Will Lehman visited auto factories in Indiana last week in the days leading up to the first-ever UAW presidential debate to win support for the Mack Trucks worker who is calling for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and placing power in the hands of the rank and file.

The team handed out leaflets advertising the September 22 debate pitting Lehman, a tiered worker at the Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, against incumbent UAW President Ray Curry and other candidates representing various wings of the UAW apparatus. Lehman is stressing the need for workers to establish their own authority in the factories by organizing rank-and-file committees independent from the pro-company UAW bureaucracy.

In the first stop on their campaign swing, supporters of Will Lehman visited the Stellantis transmission complex in Kokomo, Indiana. Many workers said they had not heard anything about the national union elections, which were mandated in a referendum voted on last year. At a plant gate distribution last Tuesday, for example, one worker, Charles, asked members of the campaign team, “Is this for casting?” referring to the huge foundry immediately adjacent to the Stellantis transmission plant where he worked.

Workers at Kokomo Casting had carried out a brief three-day strike the previous weekend over local issues. The walkout was conducted by the UAW in a completely unserious manner, with workers called to the picket line on a weekend where no production was scheduled, and the strike ended that very Monday. The UAW even told workers at the Kokomo transmission plants not to join the picket line, claiming this would be a contract violation.

When Will’s campaign team explained that because of

the years-long corruption scandal, rank-and-file workers would be voting to select the top leadership of the union for the first time and that Will Lehman was contesting the presidency to abolish the parasitic union apparatus altogether and return power to the shop floor, Charles responded, “How come I’ve never heard anything about this until now?”

When asked what the central issues were, Charles responded without hesitation. “They gave away COLA, and we’ve been going backwards ever since. There was a stretch of seven years where we had no raises whatsoever. Then we got 3 percent. What is that? A dollar an hour. \$40 a week is nothing. We need to open the contract. Right here in Kokomo, Frito Lay is offering \$42 an hour for starting pay for a maintenance worker. Can you imagine what COLA would be right now? It would be at least five or six dollars an hour.

“The union said the company had us over a barrel. But the truth is we had scoundrels in the International that were taking kickbacks. That is so disgusting still!!

“Then they came for an extra half-hour in dues money every month. That was supposed to be a temporary levy to build up the strike fund. But that never went away. Especially in the last two contracts, it took forever for us to see any raise.”

Other workers singled out the multiple tiers as the most damaging concession the UAW gave away over the last three decades. “That is causing a lot of turmoil in the plant,” said Sherry, who has more than 20 years at the company and has been forced to move from plant to plant on multiple occasions. That and the widespread destruction of jobs were two major sore points.

“In ‘08 they laid off 235 skilled tradesmen,” she continued. “They came to my husband and said, ‘You’ve got to either take the buyout or move to a different plant.

So he asked, ‘Would you move my wife?’ But their answer was, ‘Why would we do that?’ And the union did nothing. We had no choice but to take the buyout.”

“Why can’t we get a pension and COLA?” asked Monik as she was leaving the transmission plant. “The economy is changing. Everything has gone up. I’m a single parent. Even two-parent homes can’t make it.”

A lot of workers were impatient with the union for failing to inform them about the election and how the voting would take place. “The UAW doesn’t fight for us,” commented Nicole. “The last time we voted somebody new in, he said he was going to be different. But in the end, it was the same thing over again.”

Sheila has 38 years with the company and has been forced to move several times since starting in the van plant in St. Louis. She studies the news about the company and described the massive destruction of jobs that has gone unanswered by the union. “When the four-speed and the six-speed [transmissions] went, they eliminated 1,000 jobs. In return the company brought the spray bore process which uses five people on two shifts. That’s all you can give us is 10 jobs?”

She talked about the new engine plant nearby which may have as many as 500 jobs. “But those are not new jobs,” she said. “They took one full shift and moved everybody to the engine plant.”

Right now, the department producing the nine-speed transmission has been laid off for two weeks, and the eight-speed has been cut back to two shifts. “It is crazy!” she exclaimed.

The call by Will Lehman’s campaign for workers to join forces with workers in Europe and other countries to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and return power to the shop floor in a common struggle to defend all jobs resonated with Sheila. “Stellantis has partnered with a company called Pause to build an electric transmission which is designed to make the battery last longer,” she said. “That company is in Italy. We have got to build up something more reliable than what we are working with. All that corruption. That was a nightmare!”

Next, supporters of Will Lehman visited the GM assembly plant in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The plant builds the top-selling Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra light trucks. At the plant the company has turned increasingly to the use of temp workers to keep the plant operating at full production levels during the pandemic.

Many workers were sharply critical of the local union. When they heard that the federal monitor was putting on

the first-ever one-man, one-vote election in an attempt to give the union a facelift following the corruption scandal, they remarked that the head of their local union had been exposed for corruption elsewhere and moved over to the Fort Wayne plant.

Among other complaints, the company was systematically abusing the contractual requirement to provide a break after 2.5 hours of work and the local union did nothing. “In the last contract we went on strike and fought to have an extra break because we would be working over 2.5 hours without a break,” a young worker reported to the campaign team. “I talked to my committeeman about this already, and they say they can’t do anything about it.”

While supporters of Will Lehman were speaking to workers, a representative of the local UAW apparently called GM plant security to escort the Will Lehman campaign team off the premises in violation of the federal monitor’s rules that govern the conduct of the election and protect the right of each candidate to speak to all members of the union. When the Lehman team explained the situation and the rights of the candidate under the monitor’s rules, the head of plant security informed the team that the top plant management had placed a call to General Motors headquarters in Detroit and was waiting for instructions. Plant security decided not to prevent the distribution of election materials.

At that point, workers who were waiting behind the turnstiles before leaving for the day asked to have some of the Lehman campaign statements entitled “Return Power to the Rank and File” so that they could read them and distribute them to their coworkers who were lining up. When the first batch was exhausted, they asked for more statements and palm cards advertising the debate that was being held the next evening so that everyone would have a copy.



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