

“It’s time to make a change!”: Stellantis Jefferson North worker urges support for Will Lehman, rank-and-file committees

Kathleen Martin
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Work at JNAP or another auto plant? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us about conditions in your workplace, or to learn more about organizing a rank-and-file committee.

An autoworker at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant (JNAP) in Detroit, owned by Stellantis (Chrysler), recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about her support for Will Lehman’s campaign for president of the United Auto Workers union. Lehman is a Mack Trucks worker and a socialist, and is calling for a rank-and-file rebellion to abolish the UAW bureaucracy and bring power to workers on the shop floor.

Jane—whose name has been changed to protect her from retaliation—spoke about her disillusionment with the UAW and conditions at JNAP, and appealed to her coworkers to join her in forming a rank-and-file committee at the plant.

Jane had initially written to Lehman, “Hello Will, my name is Jane and I truly support your campaign. I do spread the word about your campaign and your inspiring message to a few of my friends and coworkers. But it’s really hard to truly get word around my plant because of intimidation tactics used in my plant. And A LOT of people don’t even know we should be voting this year.

“Our union doesn’t teach us anything, and when I do ask questions I’m either told a lie or just something to get me off their back. I’m so over the scare tactics and ready for someone to teach us as they properly lead us into better working conditions.

“I have no time for my family, doctor visits, anything, because we’re forced to work every day 10 hours instead of the eight we were told. I really want you to win. We don’t want to wait until next year for another sellout contract. We need help NOW.”

“We’ll see the initiative once we start working on this, and that will speak for itself”

In a discussion with the WSWs, Jane continued, “Back in the day, my grandparents spoke of the Big Three, and how they were proud to be a part of the UAW, and to work and be able to provide and give us a nice life. But also, they had a good job and they still had time for family. I want to take it back to that, where we don’t have to break our necks and backs, and we have to choose between providing or being supportive for your loved ones.

“In building this rank-and-file committee, I believe we have to start somewhere. I can’t guarantee success. But I feel like if we work together, if we are there for ourselves, we don’t have to make promises. We’ll see the initiative once we start working on this, and that will speak for itself. I don’t want to say that I’m making promises. I want to just tell people let’s try to become united on a deeper level, on a different platform. Because what we have been doing isn’t working. I’ve been here over 10 years and I haven’t seen unity yet. I think it’s time to make a change!

“My grandmother and grandfather both retired from Big Three plants after several decades working there. My grandmother is the one who fuels my fire when I complain about stuff to her. She always gives me a history lesson. What she says is that the plant has always been a dirty game, but workers had someone to fight for them and she don’t understand how corporate is getting away with the things that I complain about.

“Corporate is the devil and the union is the devil’s advocate”

“But I understand why it’s happening. Corporate is the devil and the union is the devil’s advocate. I don’t get mad at corporate. It doesn’t upset me at all. They’re greedy, their shareholders are greedy, and the only way to be ‘successful’ is to be greedy in their eyes. That’s what they want. It feeds them, I expect it from them, so I’m not mad at them when they treat us like crap. I’m mad that we pay somebody else to help them. I’m mad that my union allows it to happen.”

Jane outlined the problems at her plant.

“The last contracts were extremely, extremely terrible. The union kept saying that it was the best we were going to get, which I believed until I realized these people [UAW negotiators] don’t really care. And I wanted to keep rejecting but they’re okay with postponing and postponing and postponing. I don’t even know what’s in my local contract. That’s how bad it is! Every time something happens in my plant, I’ll be like, so how can they do this? Maybe it’s in the local contract. And every time something changes, it’s always in the local contract. But again, we don’t have a local contract in front of us.

“It’s always something! I don’t like that they can take our vacation. How is that fair for us? You take 40 hours of our time, for shutdown! That’s not on us! We deserve more vacation time. If they’re going to take some of our time for their shutdowns then give us more time for

vacation. I think it's horrible. I also think we need to reestablish sick days.

"One issue is antagonizing of the worker and the overload of work. They are always antagonizing people, they walk the line to antagonize their workers. You're working people 50 to 60 hours a week. People were complaining about being 10 hours, four days and now it is changed to five, six days at 10 hours.

"Our vehicle is poorly built, not because of the workers, but because of the engineering. But instead of being honest with people, they would rather walk the line and blame everything on workers. And I'm really tired of it. It's getting to the point to where it's becoming worse. Every day I don't even want to go to work. And choosing to not make money rather than go into that workplace."

"They took down a lot of safety measures for COVID"

In March 2020, workers at JNAP participated in the wave of wildcat strikes which erupted in auto plants in Italy, Spain, Canada and the US. Workers demanded protections from COVID-19 as it first spread unrestrained throughout the auto plants, while the UAW and other unions sought to keep production going without interruption.

After a two-month shutdown in 2020, forced by the independent action of workers, the companies and the UAW were able to restart operations prematurely and while the pandemic was still in its early stages. More recently, the UAW apparatus has worked with the companies to discard what little remained of their inadequate safety measures.

"You can take off for COVID, but you do not get paid for COVID anymore," Jane continued. "If you're sick, you cannot take off and come back the next day with a doctor's note. You have to stay off and you have to be reinstated. If you have a kid who's sick you can't take off for a day, you got to come to work. If you let them know your kid is sick then they might let you go home if they got manpower, but it's ridiculous. This is the type of stuff that the union allows. What's the point of having FMLA [Family Medical Leave Act]?"

"They took down a lot of safeguards for COVID. At the lunch tables they had these plastic separators. And they took all of that stuff down and the safeguards aren't in place. They don't have people cleaning between the shifts, they took that away even when COVID was still really bad because they want to get the line running."

She also explained that there is no longer drinking water available to workers in the plant. "They used to buy cases of water. So basically, they just would have cases and they gave every team a refrigerator for keeping them cool. Then they just said they're not providing water. And the issue is, people work hard and we need to hydrate. It was supposed to be unlimited, you can drink as much as you want, just to keep you going so you don't get so hot or overheated. But they just came to the conclusion that they weren't providing water anymore."

Jane witnessed a coworker get written up for having a fan on in their personal workspace. She explained how workers are not allowed to sit in their own chairs on the line without getting written up or reprimanded, and that the shared sitting spaces in the plant are unsanitary, due to the high volume of workers, and the nature of COVID and monkeypox spreading through close contact.

"Where do we have time for our kids? Our families?"

"How long can this last? Because it's very disruptive. We can't do anything outside with our families, everything revolves around Chrysler [Stellantis] everyday all day. And it's like, when we try to talk about it all we get scare tactics. They threaten that if we don't accept certain things then we lose our vehicle, our product. I just feel like 10 hours, five days, six days a week? Where do we have time for our kids? Our families? You can't even go to the doctor if they're not open after 5 p.m.

"And when we ask the UAW, the answers they give us all sound like management-type answers. So I might as well just ask management then. Like what do we even have a union for?"

"To build this rank-and-file committee is the start of an opportunity"

Jane urged her coworkers to join her in building a rank-and-file committee, so that workers' needs can be met.

"To my coworkers: I want to say that I'm here to give all the plant workers the opportunity to have a voice. Not to bash one another, but to have a voice and a platform to be heard. And, hopefully, to build a real solidarity, to where we can make change. There is so much keeping us apart, that we don't even see that we're fighting each other. And we're cutting each other's throats, and the union sits back and really just hands us the dagger!

"To build this rank-and-file committee is the start of an opportunity to not only make this place better for ourselves, but to make this place better for future workers and just the future in general. Our kids might want to grow up and be a part of the Big Three. And I surely want to see my kids be successful or anyone's kids to be successful. But I would hate to see them having to go through what we go through."

To contact the WSWS for assistance in organizing a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact