

Deere workers voice support for Will Lehman for UAW president: “What he says, it’s all true”

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

Supporters of Will Lehman, who is running for president of the United Auto Workers International union, campaigned among workers at agricultural and heavy equipment giant John Deere last weekend. Lehman, who works at Mack Trucks in Pennsylvania, is calling for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy, the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor, and the development of a network of rank-and-file committees to fight for workers’ interests.

Deere workers responded with interest to Lehman’s campaign program, and those who were familiar with it voiced strong support. “I have been following him, he’s a good candidate for president,” a worker at Deere’s North American Parts Distribution Center in Milan, Illinois, told a campaigner. “I’ve been talking to people at work about him. He’s got my vote.

“I’ve voiced my opinion at work about how I feel about the current president and vice presidents,” the worker added. “They know I’m pissed. I couldn’t believe their lies during the debates. What Will says, it’s all true.”

“I think Will’s doing a good job,” said Zion, a young worker at Deere Harvester Works in East Moline, Illinois. “We need someone to step up in the union, to give us the chance to have equal rights. I’m right behind you Will.”

Campaigners for Lehman distributed a statement addressed to Deere workers he issued on September 22, which explained his platform and reviewed the UAW’s betrayal of the 2021 strike by 10,000 Deere workers.

“2021 was the year when workers began to say ‘no

more concessions!’” Lehman wrote in the statement. “When the first two tentative agreements were brought back, UAW VP Chuck Browning and other officials, which they claimed had ‘significant gains,’ workers responded, ‘This must be a joke.’ The agreements were completely disconnected from what workers were demanding, including far higher wage increases and the restoration of retiree health care.”

Following in the footsteps of Volvo Trucks workers, who rejected three contracts backed by the UAW bureaucracy last year, workers at Deere voted down two UAW-endorsed contracts, the first by 90 percent.

Lehman continued in his statement:

Seeing that the UAW bureaucrats would not fight for you, workers began to organize on your own, forming rank-and-file committees, including the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee. These committees played a critical role in providing information and a perspective during the strike, countering the lies of the company, its media, and the union bureaucracy, and appealing for workers at other companies to mobilize in support.

The Deere workers’ struggle won powerful support internationally, with Deere workers in Germany and other countries expressing their solidarity with the fight of their brothers and sisters in the US. Lehman, pointing to the immense potential power such solidarity reveals, has placed the need for international unity among workers at the center of his campaign, calling

for support for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The UAW apparatus ultimately forced through a deal with Deere nearly identical to the one workers had earlier voted to reject, by using a combination of threats and intimidation, and starving workers out on just \$275 a week from the union's giant \$800 million strike fund.

However, virtually every Deere worker campaigners spoke to over the weekend voiced their opposition to the final agreement and their desire that the strike had continued, contrary to the attempts by UAW executives such as Vice President Chuck Browning to present their 2021 sellout contract as "the best in decades."

"It was something that I voted 'no' on," one Harvester worker said. "I was ready to go another round, even though I was broke." She said she had not heard about the UAW presidential candidates debate that took place on Thursday, which the UAW bureaucracy has effectively sought to conceal from workers. When informed that current UAW President Ray Curry has taken in more than \$2 million in compensation since 2004 from his positions in the apparatus, she exclaimed in shock, "Shut up!"

The other Deere workers that campaigners spoke to had also not heard about the UAW presidential candidates forum streamed on September 22, in which Lehman debated longtime bureaucrats such as current Ray Curry and Shawn Fain. The UAW apparatus has effectively tried to keep the debate a secret from workers, hoping to prevent them from seeing the bureaucracy openly challenged and denounced.

"What do I get out of my dues?" a third Harvester worker asked. "I don't have a problem being in the union, but what do I get out of my dues? I still got a shitty contract. It's my contract, but I had, like, no say in it at all."

Referring to the 2015 contract, when the UAW released limited contract "highlights" and had workers vote on the spot, he said, "Yeah, I believe that was fraud. There was corruption there. They pulled us into a high school, read off a few things, and wanted us to sign it right then and there."

A worker who was just recently hired at Harvester and worked two jobs spoke angrily about the seven-month probationary period, which was maintained in the contract pushed through by the UAW. "You don't get any leave until after a year. You have unexcused

absences, but they're counted against you. And you don't get any union representation, even though you're still paying dues."

"Inflation is tearing us apart," said Pamela, a veteran worker. Describing the impact of the pace of work on workers' bodies, she continued, "People are rushed, because they got us rushing. Now they're getting tendonitis or messing up their shoulders because they just don't get that break."

Many other Deere workers spoke with anger about the UAW apparatus and its indifference to their needs.

"I don't like the current leadership that's sitting up there," one worker said. "All the problems that have been there with the corruption and the bribery, we need to get all of them from the top-down gone!"

Another Harvester worker, initially skeptical of the possibility of realizing the campaign's demands to substantially raise wages and restore retiree benefits, responded enthusiastically once he heard that Lehman was calling for putting rank-and-file workers in power and abolishing the corrupt UAW bureaucracy. "That would make me vote for him, and everybody in this plant vote for him. If he'll put an end to the corruption, if he's not for sale. If that's what he's about, he's my man, I'll vote for him."



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