German workers support UAW president candidate Will Lehman: “It’s time for us to stand up to union bureaucrats”

Our reporters
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The campaign of Will Lehman, a 34-year-old worker at Mack Trucks in Pennsylvania (USA), for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union is also meeting with broad support in Germany. In the elections, which will be held by postal ballot between October and November, Lehman is running against incumbent UAW President Ray Curry, among others.

Marin, 25, lives in Düsseldorf and is currently training to become a web developer. He had watched the video of the UAW presidential candidate debate and was excited. “I think it’s good that Will is running this campaign as a socialist. I’m sure a lot of workers have thought similar things but haven’t been able to articulate it. In the US, socialism is totally frowned upon. But now Will is coming out and explaining it, in simple and clear terms.”

Marin sees a direct connection between “the question of unions and the struggle against bureaucracy with the question of the social system, that the whole society must be organized according to the needs of the workers and not according to those of the corporations. And also that he raises and makes clear that the class question is important; that’s being suppressed in the US and everywhere.”

He was impressed with how Will is performing in the campaign, and specifically with regard to current UAW President Ray Curry. “Will is doing it confidently and aggressively. I liked that he took on the other bureaucrats in the debate personally, directly, and toughly, but always factually. Will clearly says it’s not a question of swapping one leadership for another, it’s a question of abolishing the apparatus and giving power back to the workers.”

Marin liked very much how Will answered the question of corruption, which does not lie with the workers, but solely with the bureaucrats. “That’s where the beneficiaries of the parasitic UAW system sit. That’s clear and unequivocal.”

Will’s internationalism especially appealed to him, Marin said. “That’s where our strength lies, when we coordinate internationally. And Will can’t do that alone. That’s why it’s not enough to elect him. That has to be the first step, to join him. It’s up to us to build a real democracy.”

Max had already met Will Lehman at the international online meeting of Indian and German Ford workers at the beginning of his campaign.

The Ford worker from Saarlouis has been following him closely ever since. “It’s right what the young colleague is doing,” he insists. “All the corruption of the union leadership is directed against us.” He speaks from his own experience. “We have a rank-and-file action committee at Ford Saarlouis that exposes everything that’s going wrong at our company to open colleagues’ eyes.” The IG Metall union and the works council at Ford Saarlouis divided the workers there from their colleagues at the plant in Almussafes (Valencia, Spain) in a cutthroat bidding war. After the decision fell against the Saarland site, they are now working to wind down the plant.

“The works council tells us all the time, we won’t let ourselves be divided,” Max said, “but what they mean is, we won’t allow any other opinions. To them, our action committee is a thorn in their side.

“You do not hear anything now,” he added, “and they pretend there is still plenty of time and everything is fine. It’s peace, joy, pancakes,” he said sarcastically. Last Saturday, Max says, IG Metall held a “solidarity party,”

but only IG Metall [bureaucrats] and their closest supporters came. “Most [workers] didn’t feel like celebrating,” he said.

That was why he supports Will’s campaign: “I’ve gotten to know him, it’s absolutely right that he sets about organizing workers independently, against the union officials who don’t represent us but the corporations and their own interests.” It was no different in Germany, he said. “This is, after all, a worldwide problem.”

Max reported, “Our works council representatives here work like a Mafia. Many of us see the union dues as a kind of protection money. Because if you’re not in the union, you

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don’t have much of a chance in the company. If they want you out, they’ll get you out. So now is the time for us to stand up to the union officials and their works council reps,” he concluded.

Mohamed works in the metal-working industry in Duisburg. “I very much support what Will is saying and doing,” he says. “I’ve read the articles and watched some of his videos, too. You have to stand up to the union bureaucrats. They don’t represent our interests. I’ve seen this from my own experience. If workers organized independently, as Will Lehman suggests, we could stand up for our interests. And we could deal with each other openly and honestly among ourselves. At the moment, that is hardly possible in the workplace. Every mistake, every wrong word can lead to losing one’s job. That’s why I wish Will every success.”

Harald is a teacher in Duisburg and is closely following Will Lehman’s election campaign on the *World Socialist Web Site*. “It’s obviously the same rotten system worldwide with the trade unions, regardless of the type of profession or nation.” As a member of the Education and Science Workers Union (GEW), he himself had previously been “forced to agree to the goals of employers who had divided the workforce”—into salaried and tenured teachers. Harald calls this division “an almost ancient Indian caste system of very different and never adequately paid colleagues.” Therefore, he says, Will Lehman is absolutely right, “The bureaucracy must be eliminated without compromise, otherwise we teachers will also continue to be led around by the nose and cheated.”

But Harald also points out another very timely reason why workers should follow Will Lehman’s international call. “Education workers and retirees in Germany, too, are losing an average of 8.5 percent of their earnings right now, just because the education unions have had the audacity to hobble us with 1.4 percent annual wage adjustments and a no-strike agreement. Some grassroots workers are at a loss, most are angry, and some now are convinced that only inter-professional and international cooperation among workers is the way out of the permanent crisis of wage reductions.”

He concluded, “Autoworker Will Lehman from the USA, who has also engaged in a significant strike of teachers there for better schools and sufficient pay and is clearly supported by them, conveys a completely new and promising perspective to the hundreds of thousands of deceived education workers in Germany. The future of the teaching profession and schools has been destroyed by the union bureaucrats as the extended arm of the employers and can only be won back by rank-and-file employees in tough, self-organized labour struggles. It’s not enough to restaff the top positions; the entire apparatus must be replaced by committees of workers.”

David, 35, is a freight forwarder from Berlin. He would be pleased “if Will wins the election,” because “now the resistance has to be organized.” He was particularly moved by the exploding social divide. “It is quite clear that it currently amounts to a materially total division of society. Many workers are now becoming poorer as a result of the war and inflation. That can’t go on like this.”

He also welcomed Will’s international focus in the campaign. “If we organize and network only nationally, capital, which roams internationally, can play us off against each other. I, for one, am happy to help when it comes to uniting workers internationally. The best support is when we ourselves build something substantial here. We also have to be active here in Germany and Europe.”

Frank is involved in the Nursing Action Committee as a nurse and is following Will’s campaign with great interest. “It is to be hoped that he will gain support. It would also have enormously positive effects for Germany if he succeeds against the union bureaucracy in the US. Then it would be clear here that even the most entrenched structures and seemingly eternal conditions can be broken.”

The problems here were the same as in the US and ultimately in all countries, Frank said. “The unions pursue their own interests. The individual officials are sitting on cosy positions to which they are attached.” The corrupt conditions Will Lehman brings up at the UAW are no different at Verdi, the union that exerts its control over elder care and nursing here, he said. “Employers invite unions to negotiate in expensive hotels, union officials sit on company supervisory boards, probably also have stock in the companies for which they have union responsibility. That’s where it comes to you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.”

Therefore, he said, now was the time to “organize independently and internationally. Will is leading the way on that.”

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