

Ford and Stellantis workers back UAW candidate Will Lehman's campaign to fight job cuts and unify workers globally

Our reporting teams
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Supporters of Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for the president of the United Auto Workers, continue to bring his campaign to autoworkers and other workers around the country. In the last several days, campaigners visited Ford and Stellantis factories in Chicago, Detroit and Toledo, Ohio and won enthusiastic support for Lehman's campaign to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to rank-and-file workers on the shop floor.

Mail-in ballots in the first-ever direct election for top UAW executive positions will be sent to UAW members starting on October 17. The UAW monitor has recommended ballots be mailed back no later than November 18, in order to be received by the final deadline, November 28. The tabulation of ballots will begin on November 29.

The campaign takes place as the global automakers accelerate the attack on jobs. In Brazil, Mercedes Benz is cutting 3,600 jobs at its plant in São Bernardo do Campo, in the São Paulo region, the company's biggest plant outside of Brazil. Ford has already eliminated the jobs of 3,000 white-collar workers, mostly in the US, and has closed plants and cut jobs in India, Russia, Germany and other countries. In addition to temporary layoffs due to microchip and other parts shortages, Stellantis is eliminating shifts and cutting jobs at its US-based factories, including Belvidere, Illinois assembly, Trenton Engine and stamping plants in Warren and Sterling Heights, Michigan.

The global automakers are using the shift towards electric vehicles, which require fewer parts and labor time to produce, to slash jobs and transition to a chiefly low-paid, on-call workforce. During last month's debate of the candidates for UAW president, Lehman said workers had to advance their own strategy to defend jobs in the face of the shift to electric vehicles.

The UAW bureaucracy's plan, he said,

is to implement what the company says is possible and that means more situations like Lordstown, Ohio where plants are shuttered again. If the company says they need less workers, what they are really saying is they need fewer hours to complete a job.

We need to advance our own agenda. I'm a socialist. I'm working to advance a workers' agenda. Workers can use that for a shorter workweek with no loss in pay. In fact, we should be paid more, not less. This should be applied to all areas of the union's work. The time has come not to take at face value what the companies say they need to be competitive. The

companies are trying to compete with other companies, and they do so by seeing who can cut the most jobs and who can cut down the working conditions the worst. The UAW will do exactly what the companies say they want—we have to advance our own agenda.

“He is the kind of person we need”

The UAW apparatus, which opposed the ability of the membership to vote on top officers, is doing everything to keep workers from knowing there is an election going on at all. Because they are widely despised, UAW incumbent President Ray Curry and the current International Executive Board hope they can retain their privileged positions and high salaries by suppressing the turnout for the vote.

Will Lehman's campaign, however, is creating a buzz throughout the factories, where many workers watched the September 22 debate and are discussing his policies.

In Chicago, Ford workers told campaigners they had learned about Lehman's campaign from other workers who were passing out fliers inside the assembly plant. “I don't know any of the other candidates, and that's a positive thing,” one worker told the WWS. He then asked for information on when and how the voting would take place.

Workers responded enthusiastically to Lehman's demands, in particular the demand for no more plant closures and layoffs. “We're nervous for the place,” one worker said. “They are saying the full electric version of the Explorers are going to be made in Canada. So, what are we going to have going forward? What kind of job safety will we have when they go full electric? They are talking about discontinuing the Lincoln, so if they only build Explorers out of this plant, what are we going to do?”

The other worker added: “I'm pretty sure C Crew is going to be cut because the next generation of the Explorer is going to be all-electric. With all these companies competing to put these EV models out, you're going to need a smaller workforce. You won't need combustion engines and transmissions like you have now.”

The workers were very supportive of Lehman's call to reduce the workweek with no loss of pay to spread the available work and defend the incomes of all workers. They also supported his demand for a 50 percent raise for all workers, plus cost-of-living protection, and said they had just been talking about inflation with other workers in the

plant. “We can’t even afford the products we make. Some of the products we make here are more than a lot of workers’ annual salaries.”

The campaigner told them about Lehman’s meetings with Ford workers in Germany, India and Spain who are also facing the threat of job cuts and plant closures following their nationally based trade unions’ collaboration with the corporation. They explained how Lehman is fighting for an international strategy to unite workers against job cuts and plant closures, in contrast to the nationalism of the UAW and other unions, which pit workers in each country against one another in a race to the bottom.

The campaigner also gave the workers copies of the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee resolution and spoke to workers about the rail unions’ attempts to collaborate with the Biden administration to block a strike and impose a pro-company deal.

“That’s BS,” the first worker responded. “They’re pretty much telling them to shut up out of fear of what else is going to shut down, but that’s the whole purpose of going on strike.”

“Look at what’s going on behind the scenes,” said the other worker. “We’re already going home early and they’re laying off A and B crew because of parts shortages. Who else are they going to try to bribe to suppress a strike? Their concerns are about getting their parts for their money; they don’t care at all about the rank and file.”

Referring to the collaboration of the UAW with Ford, one of the workers continued, “The last three contracts have been garbage. We keep losing more and more and we’re getting nothing back. Only [highest seniority] legacy workers get a pension.”

The second worker expressed his support for Lehman’s campaign. “I completely agree based on what I read about Will already. He is the kind of person we need.”

“I support Will’s campaign to roll over temporary workers right away”

At the Stellantis Warren Truck plant in suburban Detroit, workers on the midnight shift were given a last-minute notice on Friday that there would be no work this week, allegedly because of a parts shortage. But Stellantis has already laid off the third shift at the nearby Detroit Auto Complex-Jefferson plant, and midnight shift workers at Warren Truck fear that they are next.

A temporary part-time worker, now called a “supplemental employee” (SE), met Will when he campaigned at her plant in early August. She told the WWS: “I support Will’s campaign to roll over temporary workers right away. There have been rumors for weeks, but word came down that the third shift was not going to be scheduled to work next week. The full-time workers were given the option to go on mornings or afternoons, but the SEs were just laid off.

“We don’t know whether they are going to get rid of the midnight shift or not. I went up to the supervisor and asked him. He said don’t listen to the rumors, these trucks are selling well. But we just don’t know what’s happening and aren’t being told anything by the union. I pray they won’t do us like that. I need this job and I earn my paycheck.

“When we hired in, we were given the option of joining the UAW or opting out. I joined because I wanted protection from what the company might do. But we have no protection. I have never been

absent or tardy, and I just came off working 13 days straight without a day off. Now we’re laid off and it’s going to be a big hassle to get unemployment benefits. I can’t go a whole week without income, then I’ll have to have two weeks in the hole before I get another paycheck. I’ve got to call the utility company, my insurance and ask them if I can pay a little now and pay a little later.”

A Jefferson Assembly worker also wrote in to Will’s campaign web site, saying: “Will Lehman has my full support, and people are talking in this plant every day. I encourage people that it is time for change, period. If they’re tired and want change, give Will a shot. I will also be contributing \$20 towards his campaign. Sure hope he wins.”

“If he goes worldwide and reaches out, that’s a huge difference”

A Stellantis Toledo Jeep worker told Lehman’s supporters: “Will stirs the pot. He wants to get all the plants set up where they should be. The union officials are only working themselves to find what revenue the UAW can bring in. They don’t care if a guy goes across the street and makes \$10 an hour as long as they get their union dues. The strike fund is huge, and we never struck. What they did in Kokomo was a joke. They struck for two days on a weekend when the plant wasn’t working anyway.”

He continued: “The vote coming up now will be the biggest vote in my years. The corruption in there is so bad. That is why I am leaning toward Will. Let’s get it back to the body of the people, not Solidarity House and Black Lake. If he goes worldwide and reaches out, that’s a huge difference. We have to stop them forcing the people to work so many hours a day; people have families. The 40-hour workweek has been gone for how many years? A lot of guys work a second job because you can’t make enough money. The corruption is UAW Incorporated. They talked about second tier being gone and that was a flat out lie. Anything over eight hours should be overtime. And everybody should have a good pension.”

Another Toledo Jeep worker, with eight years in the plant, said: “I agree with Will’s campaign to put power in the hands of the rank and file, but I want to know how to do it. We are going to need everybody to stand together to do it—and not just autoworkers. I used to be a railroad worker, and they want to strike because they’re forcing them to be on call 24/7. We’re not machines, but these companies think we are.

“The working class has the power, like Will said, but they treat us like drones, like slaves. The company and the union always say ‘this is a team effort.’ But they’re making a ton of profits off us. Every shift we’re producing 500 or more Jeeps, which sell for \$30,000 to \$40,000 each. And what do we get? A thousand dollars a week.

“The UAW is supposed to help us, but all they do is pass the buck. I agree with what Will is saying about workers owning the wealth we produce. But that’s going to take a revolution.”



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