Will Lehman holds meeting with academic workers: “We need to advance our own interests, not the interests of the capitalist class”

Our reporter
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The WSWS has endorsed Will Lehman for UAW president. For more information, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.

On Saturday, Will Lehman, socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), held an online meeting to bring his campaign to graduate student workers and other university employees in the UAW. The meeting was attended by grad students and tenured faculty, as well as workers and supporters of Lehman’s campaign from around the US.

The meeting took place amid ongoing struggles of university workers in both California and New York. As of September 30, 48,000 UAW members across the University of California (UC) system—including graduate student workers, academic researchers, tutors, postdoctoral scholars (postdocs) and other academic employees—are working either without a contract or under a contract that had been extended. There is also an ongoing strike authorization vote of adjuncts at New York University (NYU), where the UAW extended the previous contract by two months, with the new expiration set for October 30.

At the start of the meeting, Lehman—who is a second-tier worker at Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania, and the only socialist candidate in the UAW election—summed up his campaign’s call to abolish the corrupt UAW apparatus and put power in the hands of workers.

The UAW is comprised of two distinct layers, he explained: The rank-and-file workers within the factories and other workplaces who pay dues, versus a bureaucracy sitting on $1.1 billion in assets that enforces sellout contracts and keeps workers divided. The UAW bureaucracy accepts capitalism and is deeply tied to the companies it claims to be fighting against. Two of the last four UAW presidents were jailed as part of a far-reaching corruption scandal, in which large sections of the union’s leadership were shown to be accepting bribes or embezzling dues.

The bureaucrats, Lehman said, “operate within the framework of capitalism and believe they can win that way. They are absolutely wrong. That is why we need to force our own way forward, and that comes with linking up, and it might not be a traditional way.”

As part of the fight to unify and empower workers, Lehman advocated the formation of rank-and-file committees as a means of staying informed and coordinating actions with other workers, whether they are UAW members or not. Workers need a means to share information and unify their struggles, he said, and break out of the isolation imposed by the UAW apparatus.

“I’ll give the example of the HarperCollins workers earlier this year,” Lehman stated. “Their CEO is billionaire Rupert Murdoch. Nobody was informed of the HarperCollins one-day strike by the UAW, and they should have been, we all should have been. They should have been on strike until their needs were met. They’re making $30 an hour, but living in New York City. And I’m sure that workers from the University of California could relate to that, with one of the highest cost of living in the country.”

Responding to a comment from a UC student worker that UAW Local 5810 (which includes postdocs and academic researchers) had reportedly extended its previous contracts with the university for another month to October 31, Lehman said, “They’re being strung out on contract extensions. And this is a typical UAW play. When a contract runs out, they keep workers on the job, while they’re also appealing to the Democratic Party, which has absolutely no interest in advancing anything for the working class. The Democratic and Republican parties both are not representative of the working class.”

He added, “The way forward won’t be found in an appeal to any Democratic Party politician or any politician from either of the two parties of the ruling class. It’s going to be

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through struggle."

A graduate student at New York University (NYU), Karsten, spoke during the meeting about the UAW's betrayal of the NYU grad workers' strike in 2021.

"Last year, we struck for three weeks," Karsten said. "And we were not only in a struggle up against the university, but the UAW as well, which isolated the strike and forced through a completely rotten contract, which has been promoted widely as this 'historic agreement.' But really, this is an agreement that did not meet any of the demands of graduate student workers. It's a six-year agreement with a no strike clause.

"There was a big hullabaloo made over the fact that the wage increases for hourly workers went from $20 per hour to $26 per hour for the 2020 to 2021 year. But this is $20 or more *under* what is a living wage in New York City, one of the most expensive cities in the world, and a wage cut essentially, with inflation at over 8 percent.

"Most significantly, the union dropped the demand for 'unit erosion,' which would have essentially prevented the university from cutting positions. So any raises in wages that the university made won't have an impact on the university's coffers, because they'll be able to cut positions. And the same was true at Columbia University, which graduate students struck at the same time, but our struggles were isolated from one another by the UAW."

A professor from the New School, which is also in New York City, voiced his solidarity for part-time faculty at his university—who are UAW members and have been working under an expired contract for three years—as well as students struggling with student loan debt. Pointing out that 87 percent of instructors are part-time at his university, he asked, "How do we bring together non-unionized full-time faculty and part-time faculty at my school in New York City? How do we get rid of adjunct status entirely?"

Lehman replied, "That's the point of building rank-and-file committees everywhere. When you look at it [adjunct status], it's a kind of inequality, it's a tier. And the only way we can eliminate that kind of thing is through struggle.

"If you recognize the inequalities, and you have other coworkers that recognize those inequalities and you want to do something about it, I would say that's the basis for a rank-and-file committee right there. When we're organized and united on things, that's where our power is going to be able to be wielded."

The UAW and other unions have continuously promoted the Democratic Party, Lehman said. But the reality is that the Democrats represent the interests of the capitalist class and are pursuing policies which are hostile to the interests of the working class.

"When Biden was running for president, he made all kinds of promises, including on student debt relief. Then it went down to $10,000 of forgiveness, and now he walked that back. He said he would stop COVID, which he did not do. Now they are sending money to the government in Ukraine and advancing war with Russia and China."

He continued, "We need to advance our own interests, not the interests of the capitalist class."

Lehman also stressed that the UAW's nationalist strategy fundamentally plays into the hands of the transnational corporations. In opposition to this, the rank-and-file committees would need to be part of an international movement of workers, the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which his campaign supports.

Summing up, he said that the UAW apparatus has allowed "countless worker deaths and countless injuries" to take place under its watch. These conditions are the result of "the system we're under, capitalism, where there's human exploitation just for the wealth of a narrow few. I'm talking about workers recognizing that that's the enemy. And we need to fight against that and any form it takes."

In its efforts to keep workers divided and from developing a unified mass movement, the capitalist class and their representatives use racial and gender politics, Lehman said. He urged students and university employees to reject such identity politics, relentlessly promoted on college campuses and concluded with a powerful appeal for the international unity of the working class of all races, genders and nationalities.

Workers need to oppose "any way they try to divide us up on the floor, whether it's gender, or the color of our skin, even country," he said. "That's all irrelevant. The parts that we have for cars are from all over the world. And we need to recognize that we're a part of a global class, and we have the power to make changes globally."

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