Will Lehman joins Stellantis workers in denouncing job cut threats at Warren Truck plant

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On Tuesday, Stellantis’ Chief Manufacturing Officer Arnaud Deboeuf threatened the jobs of thousands of workers during a visit to the Warren Truck Assembly Plant in suburban Detroit. After touring the factory, Deboeuf reportedly told union officials if defects and absenteeism were not substantially reduced, the company would remove any future products and put the factory, which currently employs 5,239 workers on three shifts, on the path to closure.

After months of threatening to eliminate the third shift, workers were temporarily laid off this week, allegedly due to parts shortages. According to the United Auto Workers union, however, Deboeuf is currently deciding whether the 2,000 workers on the shift would return to work next week and will inform the union on Friday.

The UAW did not even issue a verbal protest against these threats. Instead, UAW officials fully sided with management. In a letter to Warren Truck workers Tuesday, Local 140 President Eric Graham said, “We had a meeting with Stellantis’ Chief Manufacturing Officer Arnaud Deboeuf today and what he had to say about Warren Truck Assembly was NOT good. The future of the Wagoneer at Warren Truck is at risk. Our LIVELIHOODS ARE IN JEOPARDY.

“The defects in the trucks is above unacceptable and absenteeism is at 15%. They are giving us until March to decrease absenteeism and increase quality. If this is not improved significantly, the company is not willing to allocate any future products to Warren Truck.”

Predictably, the UAW International’s incumbent president, Ray Curry, had absolutely nothing to say about the threats to workers’ jobs.

Warren Truck workers, however, were livid over this economic blackmail. “They are not getting the production they want for these $120,000 Jeeps they want to sell,” a veteran worker at the Warren Truck plant said, referring to deluxe Grand Wagoneer models. “They are complaining about quality, but 40 percent of the plant are part-time workers. Of course, there is high absenteeism because nobody wants to come in for $15 an hour.

“Now, they’re threatening workers, saying they’re going to take the Jeep out and you’ll lose your jobs. They already took the Ram truck out. This used to be one of the best plants Chrysler had for 40 years. Now they’re threatening workers at SHAP [Sterling Heights Assembly Plant], saying they’re going to move their truck to our plant even while they’re threatening that they are going to take the Jeep from us. Every time there is a new owner—and we have had lots of new owners—it’s the same old crap. They whip saw workers against each other to demand more concessions.”

Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks workers who is running for UAW president, denounced the job threats, telling the WSWS, “I call on all workers to oppose this attack on the workers at Warren Truck and mobilize in defense of their jobs. I met with workers at the plant in August and I know that a plant closure or any job cuts will rip away their livelihoods, devastate their families and destroy their neighborhoods. Workers cannot allow this to happen.

“Stellantis made a net profit of $7.98 billion in the first half of 2022, up 34 percent compared to the first half of 2021. It paid its CEO, Carlos Tavares, $20.5 million, more than 300 times the average worker, plus a stock package worth some additional $32 million and long-term compensation of about $25 million. It was the workers, including the workers at Warren Truck who produced the wealth, not Tavares, Deboeuf and the other corporate executives.

“Ray Curry and the rest of the UAW apparatus are nothing but tools of these corporations, and they are using these threats to extract even more wage and benefit concessions. Stellantis, Ford and GM are already slashing thousands of jobs in the US and internationally, and want to reduce all workers to nothing but low-paid temps.

“As I have said before, if the production of electric
vehicles requires fewer man hours, this is a reason not to cut jobs, but to reduce the number of hours we work with no loss in pay. That is a socialist and workers’ agenda that I fight for. To stop the competition between workers to see who is going to work for the worst pay and conditions, and to protect all jobs, we have to build rank-and-file committees to fight layoffs and plant closures. In opposition to the ‘Buy American’ nationalism of the UAW, we have to unite workers across borders and defend all our jobs.”

Stellantis, which is the product of a $52 billion merger of French automaker PSA and Italian-American Fiat Chrysler, is engaged in a savage cost-cutting campaign as it moves, along with other global automakers, towards electric vehicle production. Last month, Deboeuf said the cost of electric vehicles would have to be cut by 40 percent by 2030 to maintain the market and profitability.

Last month, Stellantis came to an agreement with the Italian auto unions to cut up to 1,820 more workers from the group’s Italian operations this year through so-called voluntary redundancies. “With this agreement,” Gianluca Ficco of the UILM union said, “we are trying to manage in advance the job impact of the energy transition” and manage it in a “socially acceptable” way.

Workers, however, are in no mood to accept further concessions and attacks on jobs. “I like the sound of Will’s statement that we have to unite, not just in US, but across borders so they can’t pit us against each other,” the veteran Warren Truck worker said. “I’ve been leaving his fliers on break tables for other workers to read. Some say his demands, like triple pay for overtime, is way too good to be true, but Will is saying we have to fight for it. We have to organize the shop floor because the UAW is in bed with management. I’m carrying Will’s message into the plant.”

Mail-in ballots in the first-ever direct election for top UAW executive positions are set to 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.

Because Curry and the corrupt UAW apparatus are so despised, the UAW is seeking to keep workers unaware that an election is even going on, hoping this will suppress voter turnout.

A veteran worker at the Stellantis Detroit Assembly Complex-Mack plant said union officials have told workers at the plant nothing about the UAW election. Workers only know there is an election from Will’s campaign. He heard that when a worker at Mopar asked a union rep about the election, they lied, telling them that the delegates chose the president.

The worker reported that the recent debate between UAW presidential candidates was posted in a Mack Facebook group, drawing angry reactions against the UAW bureaucrats. “Ray Curry and ‘Gibby’ Gibson acted like they didn’t know anything,” he said. “They claimed that there were not tiers. People are asking a lot of questions.”

Speaking on conditions at the plant, he said: “Stellantis wants to be a temp service. There are less than 100 tier 1 at the Mack plant and 400 tier 2 and 4,000 they hired off the street. Probably the majority working at Mack now are temps. Some workers have two jobs. No one is being rolled over to full time. Now, we have been hearing that the third shift may be laid off in November, but they haven’t given a date.”

He agreed that Will’s campaign was part of a broader fight. Addressing the inequality produced by capitalism, he noted that since the 1990s, CEO pay had risen astronomically. Commenting on Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, he said, “He spent half a billion on a yacht while others are fighting just for a living wage.”

A second-tier worker at Ford’s Sterling Axle plant in suburban Detroit said, “A lot of workers saw Will debating Curry and the other candidates and said it was phenomenal what he did taking them on like that. We are fighting our own local battles here. This place is just shy of a revolt. Ninety percent of the workers have had enough of it.

“The UAW is letting management get away with anything it wants. Guys are getting screwed over getting their minimum hours because they told management on previous occasions that they couldn’t do overtime.

“OSHA came in and asked why workers weren’t wearing safety glasses. Well, that’s because two years ago Ford said it did a study, which found that we didn’t need safety glasses. But in any industrial setting like this we should have glasses. We have complained about water leaking into high-voltage panels. The plant management said he didn’t have anything to do with that. Then we saw that they covered up the panels with fire-retardant tarp.

“I saw that they shut down Will’s Twitter account and that people protested and forced them to restore it. I also know how dirty the UAW can be. I am doing my best to talk to second-tier workers and fill them in about Will’s campaign and how we can make change for ourselves. I am going to pass out fliers to get the word out to vote for Will.”

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