

“Everybody believes that Daimler has the union in their pocket”: Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president wins support on Ray Curry’s home turf in North Carolina

James Langley
16 October 2022

The World Socialist Web Site has endorsed Will Lehman for UAW president. For more information, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.

This weekend, supporters of Will Lehman’s campaign for president of the United Auto Workers visited Daimler Freightliner plants in North Carolina’s Piedmont region, where the global vehicle manufacturer employs several thousand workers manufacturing parts, mid-size trucks, long-haul tractors and school buses.

The German multi-national produces 52 percent of all big trucks on the road in North America. The other big truck producers combined, including Mack Trucks where Lehman works, Volvo, Peterbuilt and many others, manufacture the remaining 48 percent. Hence, Freightliner is highly profitable. However, they pay the lowest wages and maintain conditions of brutal exploitation.

Outside the plant in Cleveland, North Carolina on Friday afternoon, Lora Withers told campaigners “I’m five feet tall and I weigh 115 pounds soaking wet. They put me in the paint department running a power sander. My little arms couldn’t take it.” She was forced to leave the job after a brutal six-month stint.

She described how her young child could not understand why she could not pick him up when she walked through the door. “I used to get off and have stuff from sanding all in my mouth and nose. It was like black grit that I would have to blow out of my nose and wash out my mouth.”

She was eager to hear about Lehman’s campaign and took leaflets and posters to display near the plant.

During the last decade, the company has slashed the local workforce by half, with the full collusion of the

UAW. In 2007, Daimler cut 1,180 jobs at the Cleveland plant citing decreased demand. In 2016, 1,000 more cuts were announced. Three years later, in 2019, close to 900 jobs were cut across the region, including a further 450 in Cleveland and 450 at the Mt. Holly assembly plant.

Freightliner is owned by German carmaker Daimler AG, with a combined workforce of 100,000 employees in the United States, Mexico, Germany, China, Turkey and other countries. In addition to Freightliner, Daimler also owns Mercedes-Benz trucks, Western Star, Thomas Built Buses and Mitsubishi Fuso brands.

Just as the UAW has not lifted a finger to defend the jobs of Daimler workers in the United States, the German IG Metall union is currently in discussion with the company on how to push through plans for cuts at Daimler’s Lugwigsfelde plant in Germany. More than 2,200 workers in Lugwigsfelde are threatened with layoff as Daimler implements restructuring measures aimed at switching production to electric vehicles.

In Brazil, 3,600 Daimler employees are also under threat of losing their jobs at the São Paulo plant for similar reasons. The Brazilian Metalworkers Union of ABC (SMABC) is currently sabotaging workers’ struggles against these restructuring measures.

Just months before the 2007 cuts at the Cleveland plant, five members of the Local 3520 bargaining committee and workers at the plant were victimized by the UAW International for their role in organizing an unauthorized strike against concession demands being sought by Freightliner with the support of the UAW leadership. The Freightliner 5 became an infamous lesson in the blatant collaboration between the UAW International and management.

The Piedmont area was the origin of current UAW International President Ray Curry, who began his career as a union bureaucrat at Local 5285 of the Mt. Holly Freightliner plant. Until 2021, Curry sat on the board of supervisors of Daimler AG, the parent company of both Mercedes-Benz and Daimler/Freightliner trucks before a de-merger that separated the business units that year.

On Saturday, workers distributed leaflets at the Gastonia Freightliner plant, near Mt. Holly. The Gastonia plant is a major supplier of parts to other plants in the Freightliner brand and currently employs 1,200 hourly workers.

A worker with seniority there pledged to vote for Will Lehman after hearing about his fight to return power to the shop floor. “I did not know that this kind of money was being dished out to the president and all the officers of the union,” he said. “We are going to work every day and trying to do the right thing, and at the end of the day we find out that the vice president and the president of the union are ripping us off. Why would he sit on the Board of Directors when that is not something which is part of his job?”

Many workers that campaigners spoke to were angry about concessions that had been concealed from them during contract ratifications. “Some of the things in these contract books we never voted on or had any consultation on,” one worker said.

“Everybody believes that Daimler has the union in their back pocket. In the last contract, they went from four years to six years before a new hire gets to top pay. If you had just two weeks left when the contract was ratified, they stretched you out another two years. I don’t see how the union allowed that to happen. Then we hear how a lot of them are going on these exotic trips and getting all this money.

“Will Lehman is fighting to fire those guys at the international and take that \$75 million we pay them and put that back in the strike fund. I agree to that 100 percent.”

Will Lehman’s campaign is aimed at abolishing the UAW bureaucracy and returning power to the rank and file. Lehman advocates not the substitution of one bureaucrat for another, but the formation of rank-and-file committees at every plant across the country to fight for what workers need, not what the UAW International decides behind closed doors with the companies.

Workers in the Piedmont region of North Carolina have a long history of such struggle, with major class battles fought directly on the soil of Gastonia and throughout the entire region.

In 1929, workers at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, just 10 minutes from the Freightliner plant, went on strike over working conditions. On September 14, 1929, a cartload of armed men attacked the workers as they marched to a rally, killing Ella May Wiggins, one of the main organizers of the strike.

At the time, textile mill workers in the region were expected to work six days a week, for a total of 55 to 60 hours. They earned less than \$10 a week in difficult and dangerous conditions. Whole families, including children, worked in the mills where many suffered breathing problems and lung damage from inhaling the small pieces of fabric that filled the air.

Five years later, the Gastonia area played a key role in the famous 1934 cotton mill general strike. On September 3, 1934, over 10,000 workers participated in the town’s first Labor Day parade. Over the next week, thousands of organizers traveled throughout the South in cars and trucks to help workers close down the mills.

By the efforts of these “flying squadrons,” between 300,000 and 500,000 workers across the eastern United States participated in the general strike. Many of these workers came from the cotton mills of North and South Carolina, including Gaston County, where all 104 mills had closed by September 7.

Ultimately, the strike was sold out by the United Textile Workers (UTW) in collaboration with the Roosevelt administration and the mill owners, who feared that the struggle would turn into an open threat to the entire capitalist system. The UTW leaders called the strike a success and ordered workers back to the mills with little gain. Many Southern workers felt betrayed by the hollow promises of the UTW and the federal government.

For more information, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact