

As ballots go out in UAW election, growing support for rank-and-file candidate Will Lehman

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

The campaign of Will Lehman, a second tier Mack Trucks worker from Macungie, Pennsylvania, who is running for president of the United Auto Workers, has reached thousands of workers in recent days at auto plants and other worksites across the US. Lehman has put the fight for rank-and-file power at the center of his campaign.

Ballots began going out Monday in the first direct election of UAW International officers. The voting, supervised by the court-appointed Monitor overseeing the UAW, is open to 900,000 active and retired members of the union. Ballots need to be mailed by November 18 to be received by the November 28 final deadline.

The campaign for Lehman has been building momentum over the past several weeks, with the establishment of rank-and-file election committees at several plants, including in Detroit and Chicago, to turn out the maximum possible vote.

While the support for Lehman is growing, many workers are still not aware of the election or the candidates who are running. For its part, the UAW bureaucracy is doing very little to spread awareness of the election in order to limit turnout, hoping in that way to ensure the election of its hand-picked candidates.

The start of balloting takes place just as Stellantis has announced the elimination of the third shift at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant north of Detroit. Stellantis has warned that it could close the plant, blaming workers for production defects and excessive absenteeism under conditions of continuous turnover

due to brutal mistreatment of workers. A significant percentage of workers at Warren Truck are “supplemental employees,” who start at less than \$16 an hour, below the rate paid at many fast food restaurants.

A supporter of Will Lehman at Stellantis in Detroit explained why he supported the campaign. “There’s a real interest in Will’s campaign. We deserve more. People can’t afford to lose their jobs over corporate greed and people’s selfish unhinged desires for wealth; that is disgusting.”

At the Volvo Trucks New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia, a campaign team won strong support for Lehman on Monday. Workers at the plant waged a bitter strike last year, voting down multiple attempts by the UAW bureaucracy headed by UAW President Ray Curry to force a sellout contract down their throats.

The team found warm support for Lehman’s demand to abolish the bureaucracy and transfer power to the shop floor through the construction of a global network of rank-and-file committees. They distributed more than a thousand fliers and signed up dozens of workers to join a local election committee.

Dana, a Volvo Trucks worker who started in 2004, expressed her thoughts on rank-and-file committees: “I think that committees are a great idea. To get input from those on the floor, because they know what’s going on on the floor; they know what needs to happen. It’s their future, and it’s my family’s future. I work here, my husband works here, and my son works here as well.”

When asked what she thought about Lehman’s call to abolish all tiers she said, “We’re all in here working the same hours, doing the same times on our

breakdowns, and we should be paid the same.”

A campaign team touring the Midwestern states made two stops at Ford plants in the Chicago area on Monday. They visited Ford’s Chicago Stamping plant and then traveled to the nearby Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP), speaking to workers during the afternoon shift change. There is widespread anger in the plants over harsh working conditions, intermittent layoffs due to parts shortages, and the complete disdain displayed by the UAW apparatus towards workers.

“Nobody likes the two-tier system, and it’s wreaking havoc inside the plants,” a worker with 26 years at the Chicago Heights stamping plant said. “The UAW should never have accepted it, and we have to get rid of it.”

“My buddies outside the plant are making more money than me,” one young worker said, remarking on the low pay and lack of benefits for new hires.

Another veteran worker said, “I don’t like the way they’ve stripped the new workers of pensions and other benefits. They are really screwing the young people. I’m afraid that they are going to come after our health care next contract, and the UAW will go along with it.”

Several workers spoke about impending layoffs at the plant. Robots and other new technology are being used to eliminate jobs. In some cases, supplemental workers making less than half the standard wage are being used to replace so-called legacy workers.

“With the new electric vehicle production, they are threatening to cut jobs, and we heard layoffs are coming,” a stamping worker with 27 years’ seniority said. A campaigner explained that Lehman opposes all job cuts and says labor-saving technology should be used for the benefit of workers by reducing the work week with no loss in pay instead of cutting jobs. “I agree completely,” the worker responded. “If that’s what he stands for, I will vote for him.”

At the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP), Ford workers joined campaigners at the plant gate to distribute election statements for Lehman’s campaign.

Another worker said she had been following the campaign and had listened to Lehman debate UAW President Ray Curry and the other candidates. What stuck out most of all for her, she said, was when the moderator asked Lehman how he would work with the UAW apparatus. “Will said he wouldn’t work with any of them, and I loved that,” she told campaigners.

Lehman has stressed the need for workers to build rank-and-file committees in every factory to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor. These committees, he has said, should mobilize workers to defend their conditions and prepare collective action to end the abuse of temporary workers, abolish tiers and fight for substantial increases in wages and cost-of-living protection against inflation.

Another worker with 12 years told campaigners, “We don’t have a union here, management has one. We just learned that the local is collecting more than half a million dollars in dues from us every month. At the last meeting, the Local 551 officials had the nerve to ask us to approve increasing the expense accounts for their cell phones and other things.

“We just came off temporary layoff, and we’re going to be down again. The union is leaving us completely in the dark. In all my years, I’ve never been laid off so much. It’s been at least six times this year. Every time it happens, you’ve got to move your bills around. We’ve got families.

“The UAW is not defending us. A lot of workers are thinking of getting out of the industry. I’m 51. Am I just going to leave and get a job at Walmart?”

“We sacrificed and worked through the pandemic. They said bring your butts to work; we don’t care if you get sick. But we want a safe place to work, and we want to come home to our families at night.”

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