One year after strike, John Deere workers in Iowa back Will Lehman campaign

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For more information on the campaign, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.

A campaign team touring the Midwest stopped in Waterloo, Iowa on Tuesday and spoke with hundreds of John Deere workers about Will Lehman's campaign for United Auto Workers president. Lehman's campaign to abolish the UAW apparatus and transfer power to the rank and file received solid support from Deere workers who, just over a year ago, were engaged in an open revolt against the UAW bureaucracy during their five-week strike.

On October 14, 2021, 10,000 John Deere workers struck plants and warehouses in Iowa and Illinois, as well as smaller facilities in Kansas, Georgia and Colorado. Throughout the strike, Deere workers battled not only the giant multinational farm equipment manufacturer but also the UAW apparatus, which sought to sabotage their struggle and force through a pro-company contract.

Deere workers rejected the first two deals pushed by UAW President Ray Curry, with the Waterloo workers providing the largest margin of "no" votes. Strikers formed the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee to break through the UAW's isolation of their struggle. They won support from Deere workers in Germany, France and other countries, along with workers at the Detroit automakers.

The UAW bureaucracy responded with a campaign of intimidation and lies to push through the company's "last, best and final offer," which was nothing but a rehash of the first two defeated contracts. Once again, the Waterloo workers rejected the deal, which UAW officials claimed passed nationally amid charges by workers of voter intimidation and ballot-rigging.

As the WSWS wrote at the time, "If Deere workers did not win their full demands—to get raises big enough to make up for years of wage stagnation, to restore retiree health benefits, to put an end to the rigged CIPP incentive pay scheme, and to secure major improvements to working hours and conditions—it is not because they were defeated by the company, but because they were betrayed by the UAW."

Campaigners for Will Lehman spoke with Deere workers about the lessons of their struggle and the call by the socialist candidate for UAW president for rank-and-file workers to assert their own decision-making power and unite with workers internationally.

"We shot down all four of the contracts the UAW leaders pushed," Toby, a veteran worker at Deere's Waterloo Works, told campaigners. "None of us believes the last offer was really ratified at the other plants. How can you trust UAW leaders who were hiding millions of dollars in embezzled money in their garages? In past contracts, the UAW always claimed they passed by the skin of their teeth, even though we voted it down by 90 percent.

"We went on strike to protect pensions for the next generation, get rid of all these concessions and protect our wages against inflation. We should have stayed on strike and won more."

Toby said he was glad to meet campaigners for Will Lehman's campaign and agreed with his call to mobilize all workers against inequality and exploitation. "This is affecting the whole working class," he told campaigners. "The Case [CNH] workers have been on strike for five months. The railroad workers want to fight."

Reviewing the experiences of last year's strike, he added, "The top executives at our company got millions in pay, and they said it was a problem that we were asking for more money after years of taking concessions and then record high inflation.

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"The UAW should never have agreed to these two-tier wages. We have one of the most complicated pay scales you've ever seen. But there are only about 100 of the old-timers making the higher pay, and they're losing their overtime now. Almost everyone left is making the same, lower pay now. A new hire starts at about $24 an hour."

Toby explained that Deere was now shifting production of some of its tractor cabs to a factory in Mexico. He agreed with Will's call for US workers to unite with Mexican and other workers to fight the giant multinational corporation.

"The company is taking advantage of the Mexican workers and using them to get more profits. I'm from Arizona, and I know the Mexican workers are hard-working and they want to feed their families just like everybody else. We need to pull everybody's wages up."

Toby continued, "I've got kids, and I want them to have a good future. The company tried to take pensions away for the next generation, and we stopped them. But they are going to come back for pensions and to take our health care away. It is necessary for all workers, railroad, nurses, teachers, everybody, to stand up and stop them."

Doug, another veteran worker at the Waterloo Works, told campaigners, "Feelings are still very bitter in the plant. Management hates us for striking. We should have rejected the last contract and stayed on strike."

Doug also challenged the UAW's claims that the third contract passed. He pointed to the 2015 contract fight when the UAW said the six-year deal passed by a small margin. The lead negotiator was UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who was later jailed for taking bribes from Chrysler.

Regarding the company's plans to move some production to Mexico and other countries, Doug also said he felt no resentment towards other workers. "This was planned a long time ago. You don't just decide to send production to Mexico and Germany by 2024 overnight."

Campaigners explained that Will had spoken with German, Indian and Mexican workers at Ford and GM about unifying across all borders against the efforts of the companies and the nationalist unions to force workers into a race to the bottom.

"I agree with that," Doug said. "I believe in the principle of 'equal pay for equal work,' not by lowering the wages for everyone but bringing everyone up."

He continued, "We need a changing of the guards in terms of the UAW. We were out on the picket line and only getting $275 a week in strike pay." He said he heard what happened at the convention when the strike pay was first raised to $500 and then Curry's delegates rescinded the increase back to $400. "The UAW leaders think the strike fund belongs to them. I agree with Will that the money belongs to us.

"The UAW has folded and given in to two-tier wages and other concessions. They said they needed two tiers to 'save jobs.' But after all those concessions, they cut the jobs anyway. My dad retired from Deere in 1999, and he was making more than I do today. I've been following Will's campaign on Twitter, and I am glad you came here to tell us more."

Other workers expressed their interest in Will campaign, saying they were following it on Facebook and other social media. Another worker said, "I'll take your flyer as long as it's not from the Curry team." A young worker who participated in the strike after being at work just a year said, "Even before the strike I was living paycheck to paycheck. I managed to save up $2,500 before the strike, but that didn't last. It was important that we stood up. I hadn't heard about the election, but I am glad you came and am interested in Will's campaign because he's a second-tier worker like me."

On Sunday, October 23, at 2:00 p.m. EDT, Will Lehman is hosting an emergency public meeting to discuss a strategy to defend jobs. Register here. For more information on the campaign, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.

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