

On CNH picket line in Iowa, workers back Will Lehman's call for full strike pay and mobilization of UAW membership behind their struggle

Jerry White
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Supporters of United Auto Workers presidential candidate Will Lehman visited the picket lines of striking CNH Industrial workers in Burlington, Iowa, on Friday and Saturday.

Four hundred workers who manufacture backhoes and other construction equipment walked out of the plant along the Mississippi River on May 2, joining another 700 workers at CNH's farm tractor plant in Racine, Wisconsin.

The striking workers, who are members of the UAW, are fighting attacks on their health care and pension benefits, decades of declining real wages, and the continuation of two-tier wages and exhausting work hours. The giant corporation, formed through the merger of Case and New Holland in 1999 and taken over by Italian-based Fiat Industrial and the billionaire Agnelli family in 2011, has cut off health care benefits to workers and hired replacements to break their strike.

Although the outcome of this battle will have immense consequences for all UAW members, International President Ray Curry and the rest of the union apparatus have aided the company by keeping workers on starvation-level strike benefits, forcing a portion of the strikers to break ranks and return to work. At the same time, the UAW bureaucracy has done nothing to inform other UAW members about this critical fight, let alone mobilize them to defeat the corporation's strikebreaking operation.

Even after nearly six months on the picket line, the mood among workers was defiant and determined. Pickets gave a warm welcome to campaigners for Will Lehman. Lehman's supporters played a YouTube video of the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president calling for the full mobilization of UAW members behind the striking workers and the replacement of their lost wages from the UAW's \$800 million strike fund.

Bryan, who has 15 years at the plant, said, "We're mainly out here because our great employer CNH wants to bring a three-package health care plan to us. A catastrophic plan, where if

your kid breaks a bone, you'll have to file for bankruptcy because you can't afford to pay it. The next one ain't much better. If you want to pay around \$300 a pay period for insurance, you get the 'Cadillac Plan.' The wage increases that they're offering is not going to cover our insurance. So that's why we're out here going on almost six months."

Pointing to the fact that carmaker Stellantis is also partially owned by the same billionaire dynasty—the Agnelli family—that owns CNH, Bryan said, "If you think the Agnelli family cares about you guys, think again, they don't. We're a piece of trash underneath their feet. They don't care about the working people. They just want their money, and corporate greed has got to stop. And we're trying to stand up, and hopefully get a decent contract." Bryan added that he wished that "our brothers and sisters overseas" could "shut down the docks and ports" because "it would help us tremendously."

Bryan said he had followed Will Lehman's campaign. "We've lived through the corruption," he said, pointing to the fact that convicted former UAW president Dennis Williams had originally been part of his local when he started out at a Case plant in Rock Island, Illinois. "I've watched Will Lehman, and I like what he says. The UAW International is an old boys' club. The UAW has become what it's supposed to be fighting, a big business. It needs to come back to where it was back in the day, when workers were organizing to fight."

Bryan said that the company had hired a lot of young workers in advance of the strike hoping to pressure them economically to accept deep concessions, "but we have all stood together in this fight."

Anthony, a young welder, said the UAW was providing no details about ongoing negotiations with the company. "We've been left in the dark. We haven't been given any details about the contract or what's being negotiated."

He said strike benefits covered no more than half a worker's weekly wage. To add insult to injury, workers will be expected to pay a large sum of taxes next year on the \$400 a week in

strike benefits because the UAW does not deduct taxes from the payments. Responding to Will Lehman's call for full strike pay, Anthony said, "That's what we need. I didn't know that was even a possibility." Because strike benefits were so low, he said, "some workers had crossed the picket line while many others are working outside jobs to cover bills."

Crystal, a strike captain, said, "Workers come up to me and ask me what's going on, and I say I have no clue. It's the same thing they told us at the last union meeting: 'Stay strong, maintain the line, do what you have to do to make ends meet.' But if you get an outside job, they say we can be fired for 'job abandonment.'"

"Case wants to make this only a job, not a career. They want to take away everything that we've always had. We've already got the tier system, with new hires coming in at \$19.26 an hour."

Zach, another worker on the picket line, said, "I've been on strike longer than I worked here. We need to do whatever it takes to make sure workers have a better life. They are paying strikebreakers the wages that we're demanding. Why are they saying they have no money to pay us, but then they spend it on the scabs?"

"We are demanding COLA to help fight inflation with more money in our pockets. We make backhoes at this plant that you see at every construction site in the country."

"I agree with Will's call for full strike pay so we can hold out," Zach said. "I'm living on \$400 a week in strike benefits, when I was bringing home \$800 to \$900 a week with overtime. Inflation is eating up what little we have."

Many workers were aware that Ray Curry and the UAW bureaucracy engineered a vote at the UAW convention in July to rescind a \$100 increase in weekly strike benefits, even as they voted themselves a pay raise.

"I agree with a lot of what Will is saying because of what happened at the convention," Aaron said. "One minute they voted to raise the strike pay, and then they turned around and voted not to raise it. This pissed off a lot of us. Some people were already celebrating that we were getting a raise, and then next day it turned out we were not getting it. Because the strike pay is the way it is, some people have crossed the picket line."

"The money for the strike fund comes once a month out of our paychecks," Aaron continued. "We should be able to get it back since we are out here on the line trying to get something better for everyone down here and set an example for the rest of the UAW. We're the only ones on strike now. If we can get a good contract, it opens the door for all workers to get a good contract, especially concerning Chrysler [Stellantis] because it is part of the same organization as us."

Campaigners also discussed Lehman's call for uniting workers across national borders to fight multinational corporations like CNH and Stellantis. Asked what he thought of the proposal, Aaron said, "It would help on many levels. If they were hurting and every plant was on strike, you'd see an end to

this real quick because money wouldn't be coming into them anymore. But as far as they are concerned, their not producing here is not hurting them because I believe they opened up a new backhoe factory in Brazil. Not producing here is not hurting them because they have another plant replacing what we're not producing."

He added, "You have a billionaire like Agnelli, who makes something like \$200,000 a day. He's never had to work a day in his life." The worker also denounced the UAW officials for voting to give themselves a raise. "I really believe they should take a pay cut themselves, and they should be living on the same wages that they are offering us. They should not have to not struggle with us, when they are supposed to be representing the ones who are struggling. It's hard to know the struggle if you are not down there struggling with them."

Referring to the 17-week lockout of CNH workers in 2004-05, he continued, "I heard the last time this plant was on strike before I was down here, that is when the tier system started, and it was more or less the union pushed them to sign the contract rather than fighting for a better contract. I've heard that from guys who were down here at that time. They said they felt like the union pressured them into getting the contract."

"The higher-ups are not listening to the ones who are working, paying the dues and expecting the representation," the worker said.

"The future of what is going to happen in the union starts with the John Deere workers and us. They got to treat us better," James, another veteran worker, said. Told that Will is fighting for the decision-making power to be transferred from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor through the formation of rank-and-file committees, James responded succinctly, "Yes, right now the union is like the company we are fighting against. The heads are looking for their money and their profits. We need ours."



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