

“You can make the same flipping burgers”: Nexteer workers tell Will Lehman campaigners they are fed up with UAW, management

Our reporters
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On Tuesday, supporters of Will Lehman spoke to workers at the Nexteer auto parts plant in Saginaw, Michigan about his campaign for president of the United Auto Workers union and the working conditions they face.

Nexteer employs around 2,400 auto parts workers who produce steering columns, shafts and drivelines for some of the top-selling vehicles in the US, including the Ford F-150, Dodge Ram and Chevy Silverado pickup trucks.

There is widespread disgust and anger with the UAW bureaucracy at the plant. Last May, workers overwhelmingly voted down a five-year sellout UAW contract with cuts in real wages and health care by 85 percent. The UAW refused to call a strike, dragged out negotiations another two and a half months, and then used intimidation tactics to ram through a second sellout agreement by a razor-thin 52 percent, prompting rank-and-file workers to voice suspicions of vote-rigging. The full text of the contract was not released to workers until after it was supposedly ratified. After forcing through a pro-company contract, the UAW Local 699 president said it was both a “victory” and a “relief.”

In 2015, the UAW also imposed a sellout deal after workers rejected the first UAW-backed offer by 97.5 percent. Following the defeat, the UAW called a strike on December 8, 2015 but shut it down after just 20 hours. It then browbeat workers into voting for a second deal, which was largely a rehash of the first contract, maintained the hated two-tier system, imposed higher co-pays for medical insurance and gave

management more power to discipline and fire workers.

Several workers who spoke with campaigners on Monday did not even know that the first-ever elections for top UAW officials were taking place. The UAW bureaucracy is saying as little as possible about the election to suppress the vote against widely hated incumbent UAW President Ray Curry and his cronies.

Many Nexteer workers stopped and spoke to campaigners for Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist, and expressed support for his call to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to rank-and-file workers on the shop floor.

“I started working here 16 years ago and starting rates weren’t as bad as they are now,” a worker told campaigners. “Now, you can make the same amount we make flipping burgers—it’s ridiculous.”

A young worker who started at Nexteer Saginaw in January told campaigners that his starting wage is just \$15 an hour.

Stan told campaigners: “I got hired in 2013 and over the last nine years I’ve had three kids and bought a house. It’s been good and bad. We’ve been forced to pay more out of pocket for insurance. We voted down the contract that the UAW brought back because it was not enough. The UAW International and local officials said this was the best we were going to get, and we had to accept it. It’s a five-year contract and we’re not going to get a raise for another year and a half. And that’s with inflation over 8 percent.”

“Management has all the power, and this is allowed by the union,” Bradley, a worker with almost 11 years

said. “Every day we have a target of producing 1,800 parts, and if we don’t, they make us work nine hours.”

Mike, a worker with four years, added, “During the pandemic other corporations were paying incentives to keep people. This job, we didn’t get nothing. Work through the pandemic, and what did we get? Nothing.”

Nexteer workers also spoke to campaigners about how the UAW “should have never accepted two tiers and temporary part-time work,” how second-tier workers labor side by side with workers doing the same job but making a lot more, and how workers are routinely forced to work weekends.

Workers who were currently or previously injured on the job also spoke out on safety issues. “There are oil spots on the floor, and you slip and slide in there,” one said. “There are no stools allowed, so we are standing on our feet for eight to nine hours a day,” said another.

Illustrating the widespread disdain for the UAW bureaucracy, some workers initially refused a leaflet, saying they did not want anything to do with the UAW, until they heard that Lehman is running in complete opposition to the corrupt UAW bureaucracy. Many of these workers were interested to learn more and get involved to support Lehman’s campaign.

“Conditions haven’t gotten better since I started seven years ago and they certainly haven’t improved since the last [2021] contract,” another worker said. After outlining Lehman’s call to abolish the UAW bureaucracy after decades of concessions and replace it with rank-and-file control for what workers need, the worker responded, “Well, then he’s got my vote.”



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