

Kokomo Stellantis workers voice support for Will Lehman for UAW president, denounce atrocious working conditions

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For more information on the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president, visit WillForUAWPresident.org.

Supporters of United Auto Workers (UAW) presidential candidate Will Lehman visited several auto plants in Kokomo, Indiana on Monday, encountering widespread support among autoworkers for his program of building rank-and-file workers' power against the UAW bureaucracy.

Lehman's supporters campaigned at Kokomo Transmission Plant, the Kokomo Casting Plant and the Indiana Transmission Plant, all owned by Stellantis North America. Kokomo Casting is the world's largest die cast facility, employing over 1,000 workers in the production of engine block castings, transmission and transaxle cases, and aluminum parts for automotive components.

The casting facility is where Shawn Fain, who is being promoted as the official opposition candidate to the ruling UAW faction led by incumbent president Ray Curry, started his career. Originally hired as an electrician at the casting plant in 1994, Fain worked his way up the ladder of the UAW Local 1166 apparatus before being chosen by the top UAW leadership for a position on the UAW-Chrysler national bargaining committee in 2009 and 2011, and then as an International UAW representative since 2012.

Fain, who is backed by Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), has talked about ending tiers, overturning past concessions and protecting retirees. But an examination of his career demonstrates that he has long been a cog in the UAW bureaucracy's machinery, and his election would not lead to any improvements for rank-and-file workers.

Workers who spoke to campaigners for Will Lehman expressed support for his call for the transfer of power from the corrupt UAW bureaucracy to the workers on the shop floor through the establishment of rank-and-file committees.

"I've been in the UAW for 30-plus years and only been here 10 years," a Kokomo Casting worker told campaigners. "I got in in 1991, it was better then and it's bad now. When I first read Will's stuff, I thought, I like this young guy."

Asked about Fain, the worker said, "I don't know him. I don't know anything about him." When told he has been an UAW International Rep at the UAW's Solidarity House headquarters for more than a decade, the worker replied, "He's probably not a good candidate."

As a member of the UAW-Chrysler Negotiating Committee, Fain backed the massive concessions during the Obama administration's 2009 restructuring of Chrysler, which halved the wages of all new-

hires, eliminated COLA and expanded the use of highly exploited temporary part-time employees. Far from restoring the concessions after the company returned to profitability, the UAW bureaucracy backed more concessions in 2011 and in subsequent contracts in 2015 and 2019.

Many workers expressed skepticism that Fain knew nothing about the bribes that his boss at the UAW-Chrysler Department, Norwood Jewell, was paid in exchange for signing the pro-company contracts.

"The UAW officials stole millions of dollars, and we've never gotten any of it back," a veteran Casting worker told campaigners. "These guys took bribes to take away our pensions and benefits." Another worker added, "All of the UAW executives were taking something or knew it was happening and said they didn't."

Among the most the damning indictments of Fain's record are the atrocious working conditions at the Kokomo Casting Plant, which have been overseen by UAW Local 1166 officials for decades.

The Kokomo Casting Plant pours about 1 million pounds of aluminum each day, or about 3 percent of the world's supply of aluminum. There are many potential hazards in the plant, where crucibles of molten aluminum are transported overhead to feed the giant casting machines.

"We have an antiquated metal transportation system," a worker told campaigners. "They have overhead cranes on a rail, which suspend these giant ladles with molten metal. They move metal from furnaces and launders to work sites. The overhead cranes have run off the rails before with the operators in them. It's very dangerous and needs to be upgraded."

A young worker added, "We are short-staffed in the Re-Melt area and we're missing several crane operators and hot loaders. These guys move ladles filled with molten metal on a rail to each area. If we're short staffed it makes the job even more dangerous. My wife is ready to go in there and raise hell because she wants me to come home alive."

Tina, another worker, added, "It's very dangerous in there. There are walkways between the machines and in spots you have to walk right under the molten metal as it crosses overhead." She mocked the sign at the plant gate entrance that reads, "Work Safely. Your family is waiting for you at home," saying, "My husband worries about me every day."

"There was an explosion in the plant recently," another worker added. "Somehow water got mixed in with liquid aluminum and it exploded. It was lucky that nobody got hurt this time."

One worker with 23 years at the plant spoke of the death of a

coworker and close friend who was attempting to cross over a conveyor belt when he misstepped and was thrown headfirst onto the concrete floor.

In 2011, Claude Brock Jr., 62, a maintenance worker, fell to his death from a conveyor system. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration opened up an investigation in 2011 into the death of the millwright and initially fined the company \$270,000 for seven “serious,” “willful” and “repeat” safety violations, including not requiring the use of appropriate equipment for the prevention of falls and for improper training. After the company contested the fine, Indiana OSHA officials reduced the penalty to \$45,000.

In a statement to the press, Brock’s widow, Alberta Brock, criticized IOSHA for the wrist-slap fine and noted that her husband had previously indicated to her that he was surprised that more workers were not killed or injured at the factory due to unsafe conditions.

In September 2007, John Kelly Wright, 48, was crushed to death by a die cast machine at the plant. According to an account published by his nephew, Wright was crushed between two side panels of a die cast machine after going inside to check on an apparent malfunction. Sensors failed to detect that the door to the machine was open and the machine went into operation with Wright still inside. Wright and his coworkers had complained about the safety equipment but had been told a fix was not “cost-effective.” Chrysler was eventually fined a mere \$15,000 in relation to the death, which the company promptly contested.

On September 5, 2018, Casting worker Eric Parsons was severely injured when a die slide fell on top of him. He suffered multiple injuries, including internal bleeding as well as serious injury to his pelvis and spine.

Far from opposing these conditions, the UAW local officials sit on joint labor-management safety committees that constantly sacrifice safety to cut costs and boost profits. With anger building to a breaking point earlier this year, UAW Local 1166 officials conducted a farcical three-day “strike” when no production was scheduled. The local UAW officials gave management ample warning of the planned action, and then announced a tentative agreement just in time for production to start again, right on schedule on Monday morning. This stage-managed affair was then held up by Curry and Fain as an example of union “solidarity.”

One worker described what happened:

“In the 2019 contract, the company approved a new AC system in the plant but never implemented it. In the summer it’s 115 degrees in there and the fans blow hot air on you with oil and lubrication in it. Stellantis has made profits out the roof in the first and second quarters. So the local president called a strike, but he knew the company would not lose any profits.

“We just got our new uniforms, which we do not have to pay for, but they say the air condition system is going to cost \$50 to \$70 million to install, and it doesn’t look like its going to happen. There aren’t AC systems in any of the casting plants.

“I knew Fain and liked him. But everybody above the workers on the shop floor is corrupted. I hope your candidate, Will Lehman, can change things. We have to get rid of the second-tier system where a worker right next to me is making half the pay. How could the UAW ever agree to that? Before working here, I worked at FedEx. They fired all the top-pay guys and replaced them with part-time workers with no pensions.

“With groceries costing \$300 a cart, we have to have a good raise

and cost of living in the contract. We used to work seven days a week, 12 hours a day. Now we are not getting any overtime and are living on a 40-hour paycheck. Things are getting very tight for all workers. I see what the railroaders are going through. If the railroad workers and the truckers struck, the whole world would stop.”

John, a young worker at the casting plant, added, “We’ve had TPTs working here for eight years before being rolled over to full-time. The company can force them to work 12 hours a day one week, and then lay them off the next week. Sometimes they only get one day a week, and they can’t claim unemployment benefits. How can you feed your kids on that? I was three weeks from getting paid \$19.50 an hour when I was rolled over to full-time. Then they cut my pay to \$17.50 an hour.”

At the nearby Kokomo Transmission Plant, workers expressed the same concerns. One worker said: “The biggest issue for us here is the unfair treatment of TPTs. Subaru has a nonunion plant [in Lafayette, Indiana] and they treat their new-hires way better than they are treated here.

“In the battery plants, the companies are happy to have the union, as long as they agree to wages and benefits which are the same as the supplier plants. But a battery is what powers a vehicle. It should be the same as a powertrain plant and be part of UAW Local 685. Instead, the union is agreeing to have the workers paid chump change and get no benefits. Then they turn around and say, ‘Yeah, we have a union plant.’”

A veteran Kokomo Transmission Plant worker added, “We have never been in a better position to strike. The company has no parts and if we struck we should shut down their whole operation. But it’s up to the people to walk out. Some of the older guys say, ‘I’m just a year or two away from retirement and I don’t want to strike.’ But if we don’t fight, we’re going to lose everything, including our pensions.”

“The TPTs are overused and abused, and they don’t have any representation,” Richard, a worker with nearly three decades on the job, said. “How can you expect someone to keep coming to work under these conditions? TPTs are threatened and harassed by management, put under the gun and fired. It’s like forced labor. There are supervisors who sexually harass workers who are too scared for their jobs to say anything. It’s a hostile work environment.”

Commenting on the rail workers’ struggle, Garfield, another veteran worker, added, “I have a friend who is a railroad worker, and they are on call 24 hours a day. They say they can’t even think about taking a day off. How can anyone work under those conditions? It’s going to be the same for us if we don’t fight. I like what your candidate is saying.”



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