

“They cut our wages in half... and the UAW let them do it”: Indiana autoworkers support Will Lehman, describe legacy of UAW betrayals

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

Autoworkers in Indiana expressed strong support for United Auto Workers (UAW) presidential candidate Will Lehman on Tuesday, while speaking in detail about their working conditions and experiences with the UAW bureaucracy. A campaign team visited the General Motors Metal Center in Marion and the Allison Transmission complex in Indianapolis.

The small industrial towns of Central Indiana—Muncie, Anderson, Kokomo—played a critical role in the mass industrial struggles that led to the founding of the UAW in the 1930s and the militant struggles of subsequent decades. Inspired by the Flint, Michigan sit-down strike in 1936-37, workers occupied GM’s Delco Remy and Guide Lamp plants in Anderson, defying GM’s Black Legion thugs, the declaration of martial law and occupation of the town by the Indiana National Guard.

Over the last four decades, however, the UAW has colluded in the savage attack on the jobs, living standards and working conditions of workers in the area.

Lehman’s supporters spoke with GM workers at the Marion Stamping Plant, which employs 758 workers in the production of stamped metal parts for GM vehicles. As recently as 2014, the plant employed 1,600 workers.

Once an industrial hub, Marion—like other automotive towns in Indiana—has been devastated by decades of downsizing and wage cuts. As of 2017, one in four Marion residents lived in poverty. Among adolescents between ages 12-17, nearly half (45 percent) live below the poverty line.

Workers were enthusiastic to hear about Lehman’s campaign and his call for a fight against layoffs and

concessions. One worker approached campaigners, saying, “I been waiting for you to show up. I voted for Will and have been following his campaign. I saw his supporters were down in Spring Hill, Tennessee. The tiers are ridiculous, and they have to go.” He grabbed a stack of flyers to distribute inside the plant and stuck a poster on the bulletin board by the entrance.

A veteran worker with 24 years in the auto industry described the Marion plant as a “melting pot” of workers who had come from other GM plants that had closed and carried out mass layoffs: “We’ve got guys here from Hamilton, Ohio; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Bowling Green, Kentucky; Mansfield, Ohio; Janesville, Wisconsin; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and the GM stamping plant in Indianapolis.”

He himself went through the experience of the 1999 spinoff of GM’s Delphi parts division, which then declared bankruptcy in 2007, tearing up the wages, pensions and conditions of 42,000 former GM workers. “When I was at Delphi, they cut our wages in half from \$30 an hour to \$15, and the UAW let them do it.”

The worker also spoke about the experience of Indianapolis GM stamping workers, 80 miles to the south. In 2011, GM closed its Indianapolis Stamping Plant, destroying 650 jobs, after workers rejected the demand by the corporation—backed by the UAW—that they accept a 50 percent wage cut in order to attract a new buyer for the plant. In reference to the militant struggle by the workers, the veteran commented, “The guys here tell me they threw the UAW International officials out of the meeting for demanding the wage cuts.”

Another worker described the indifference of local UAW officials to conditions at the stamping plant. “You

can't even get the phone answered, because they're sleeping."

A millwright added, "The UAW is not taking any stand against management. The committeemen always say, 'They can do that' and management just does what it wants. They've been combining skilled trades positions and cutting jobs. Now, they want to turn welders into die makers. We don't know if it's for electric vehicles or what. There is a shortage of skilled tradesmen because they've been outsourcing everything and haven't hired enough apprentices. Die makers are the only ones who are supposed to run the presses, but now they want production workers to do it. I told them I wasn't going to do it and said, 'You train them. Oh, I forgot, you don't know how to.'"

He went on to describe safety violations by management, carried out with the collusion of the local union officials: "They want to be 'lean and mean,' but they're endangering us. They're saying if you are trained to run a small gantry crane you are skilled enough to run a big overhead crane. Management has lost their minds. Those cranes move dies that weigh 50 tons. If they move a few inches the wrong way, they can kill or badly injure someone. The company and the union say safety is the priority but that's a bunch of crap. We don't have a local union."

In January 2021, a worker at the plant was crushed to death by a 7,000-pound section of steel wall dropped by a malfunctioning fork truck.

Lehman's supporters also spoke with Allison Transmission workers in Indianapolis. In 2007, GM sold its Allison Transmission commercial and military business to the Carlyle Group and Onex Corporation for approximately \$5.6 billion. This included seven manufacturing facilities in Indianapolis, which employed 3,400 workers producing automatic transmissions for medium and heavy-duty commercial vehicles. The plant also produces transmissions for US military tanks and other armored vehicles.

One worker said he voted for Will because "we need a change." He added, "We have a lot of tier workers in here and I know [Will] talks about getting rid of that. And I think we should. They're bringing workers in here for less than \$15 an hour. That's crazy. This company made record profits in the past couple of years." Responding to Will's call for the rank-and-file workers to take decision-making power out of the hands of the UAW apparatus, he said, "I agree with that. The UAW is nothing more than a racket, in my opinion."

Scott, a worker with more than four decades at the plant described the changes he has seen. "For the legacy workers it's ok, but for the new guys they don't have pensions or good wages. None of us has had COLA for years. The local negotiated a six-year agreement and when it expires, we could be in a recession. We've given up all our negotiating power. The company can't even hire anybody with a \$15 starting wage. Amazon is paying more than that."

He went on, "GM sold us in 2007. We haven't had a raise in 15 years. At some point, we are going to have to strike. We voted by 97.2 percent to reject the last contract but they pushed the contract through. Now we're being forced to work two Saturdays in a row and for a lot of guys Sunday is their only day off. The total point of the union was to protect and represent us. But the higher-ups in the union don't care. But we're the ones in there making the product and the profits."

Another worker said, "I voted for Will yesterday. There is too much authority in the company instead of the union. The company tells the union what to do. There is no grievance procedure. The grievances are just childish. I worked for 20 years at Ford and was a shop steward there. This union here is totally different. It's more in the company's hands. Ford shut down in 2011. Then GM Stamping, the Chrysler foundry, Harvester and all the big plants. It worries me about this one. Hopefully, I'm going to make it to retire. But then there is the next generation, and I'd like to leave them something, but I don't know."

At first, the worker expressed some hope that the chip shortage and growing tensions with China and Russia might lead businesses to "bring back jobs to the United States."

He quickly shifted, however, when Lehman's supporters told him Will was fighting for the international unity of all workers against the global corporations.

"I think it would be great. We need to even up like that. I mean, we need that. We all need to stick together," he said. "Whether we are in Mexico or Japan or wherever we're at. If we are all going to be autoworkers, we all need to be the same. We all need to stick together."

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