

# Michigan teacher calls for support for Will Lehman for UAW president: “We all need rank-and-file committees”

Nancy Hanover  
2 November 2022

*Rochelle, a long-time educator in Michigan, recently spoke to the WSWs about Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president, his call for workers to form rank-and-file committees, and broader political issues facing workers, including the escalating war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*Like teachers throughout the US, Rochelle is angry over the unnecessary suffering of children, educators and communities from the bipartisan “let it rip” policy of the Trump and Biden administrations during SARS-CoV-2. That terrible and ongoing death toll is now compounded with widespread school transmission of RSV, flu and other pathogens. She explains here why she is supporting the fight of socialist Will Lehman for UAW president and what his campaign means for educators.*

*Among her reasons for supporting the Will for UAW President campaign, Rochelle also cites the betrayal of the strike at American Axle, where her husband worked. The 2008 strike stretched for 87 days before the UAW bureaucracy forced through a massive concessionary contract. More than half of the 3,650 workers in Michigan and New York lost their jobs. By 2012, the billionaire owner closed the plant and shifted work to Mexico. Rochelle emphasizes, “If we were to unite internationally, workers like my husband wouldn’t be thrown under the bus. They would work together in solidarity.”*

*To learn more about the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president, visit [WillForUAWPresident.org](http://WillForUAWPresident.org).*

\*\*

**Rochelle:** I think it’s important for educators to support Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president. We all need rank-and-file committees. I am a member of the Michigan Educators Rank and File Safety Committee.

We teachers are on the front lines. We know what has to be done to help our communities. We need good public health officials based on science, not determined by what is politically or economically preferred by business.

## Opposition to war

I support Will because he’s against the false sense of

nationalism which pits us workers against each other, instead of unifying us. He’s for a much better quality of life for all workers.

War shouldn’t even be a question. It benefits no one other than the war-industrial complex of capitalists. It is also a diversion, to take the conversation off the topic of the pandemic. Wait until we see the cost of heating our homes this winter! That, in addition to the cost to put gas in our vehicles and the outrageous cost of food. A friend in England is already talking about bread lines there, it’s very bad.

The only war we need to be waging is against the pandemic. The capitalistic forces have carried out some of the largest crimes against humanity in this lifetime during the pandemic.

We are spending all this money on a proxy war in the Ukraine. As a result, everyday people are facing enormous economic struggles. Meanwhile, [American Federation of Teachers president] Randi Weingarten is spending teachers’ union dues to travel to the Ukraine to promote this war. It is sickening that they claim this “promotes democracy.” This benefits neither the ordinary Ukrainians nor Americans.

This is geopolitical war profiteering. The unions are part of the problem, not part of the solution. They are too deeply entrenched in the geopolitical capitalist system.

The bureaucracy within the unions needs to be eliminated so that the union can be controlled by the rank-and-file rather than the business interests. This isn’t just a problem among autoworkers. We educators feel it.

## The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educators and students

Our unions haven’t done what we needed to protect us, our students and our communities, especially during this pandemic. The pandemic highlighted the crisis; schools became one of the largest drivers of community spread.

Many of my students live in multigenerational homes, with grandparents, nieces and nephews. More than one has lost a parent to COVID. One girl who suffers from anxiety came down with COVID. Her father then caught it, struggled for months, then

passed away from COVID pneumonia. She feels responsible for her father's death.

In addition to their grief, the family has new financial struggles. They can't afford medications to manage chronic health conditions, medications that take several weeks to build up to therapeutic levels, creating additional difficulties and health setbacks. It makes me sick to see these conditions.

Schools and factories are the two main centers for community spread because so many people congregate from different areas. Some of my students have had COVID multiple times, others lost grandparents, aunts and uncles, or been hospitalized themselves. It is very traumatic for all of them. After the CDC shortened the official quarantine period, many workers feel pressured to come back before they are well. I saw it with one of my coworkers.

Schools are dealing with many more issues: social, emotional and economic. This is true nationally and internationally. We lack the resources and personnel to cope with this crisis. Behavior referrals have increased together with the number of emotional issues. Many more students are struggling. The alternative high school in my district has more students than ever before.

Educators are maxed out. They feel they are dispensable. Our lives and our health don't matter. Initially, when kids were home during the lockdown, we were praised as heroes. But as things continued, teachers were called "lazy" for teaching remotely, with some claiming we shouldn't be paid because we are "not working." While many were working even harder to help these kids.

We often described it as "building the airplane while we were flying it." The complications were huge. We didn't have proper training or experience with some of the technology that was introduced or utilized during remote sessions. Internet and Wi-Fi were not always available. New platforms and programs were suddenly introduced. It was absolute chaos.

The union bureaucracies were part of a nationwide push to get back to face-to-face. This contributed to high levels of community spread, illness, and deaths. Rank-and-file committees help ensure the voices and needs of the general population and the workers on the front lines are being heard.

Workers in Michigan took matters into their hands [walking out of the auto plants in March 2020 over COVID] because the leadership in the unions and the political parties wouldn't do it. Many lives were saved here in Michigan because of that. But shortly after Biden was elected, science and metrics went out the window. He and the unions partnered up to get all the schools open for face-to-face learning and pushing all the laborers back to work. As a result, the number of infections and deaths ballooned.

In Michigan, they threatened to take away school funding if we weren't face-to-face. The result? In the United States, one out of every 311 people have died, but in Michigan, it is one out of every 254. And in St. Clair County, it is 1 out of every 180 people!

The US Government Accountability Office reports that COVID played a role in one of every four maternal deaths in 2020 and 2021. The US already had higher maternal death rates than other developed countries before the pandemic.

This was to make profits. All they wanted was everything open. The consolidation of wealth is disgusting. Many of the local mom-

and-pop shops were forced to close their doors, while Amazon and other big business made unconscionable amounts of money.

The CDC shortened recommendation quarantine periods. This had nothing to do with science, and everything with economic gain—getting workers back to work. Then they stopped tracking the information to claim the pandemic was over, just stopped reporting it. It makes me angry, trying to blame the lockdowns and isolation for all these new high numbers of RSV, instead of acknowledging that our infrastructure is severely outdated and needs to be improved, especially air quality, in all of our public spaces.

Workers are told there's no money. But they're sending it overseas for war. We get contracts imposed on us. Laws have been changed to illegalize strikes, like among teachers. There is a push to weaken our ability as workers to secure a basic standard of living, and safe working conditions.

### **"Supporting Will's campaign will help change the paradigm"**

Teachers should support Will Lehman because the union apparatuses are working against us and our communities. Supporting Will's campaign will help change the paradigm. The union bureaucracy is tied to the political and economic forces of capitalism which work against all of us, nationally and internationally. We need to eliminate that bureaucracy and bring control to rank-and-file workers. That will allow us to successfully fight the struggles we need to fight.

Will calls for unifying across borders. My husband was a UAW member on strike at American Axle in Hamtramck in 2008. They worked ungodly hours. He'd sometimes leave the house at 3 AM and not get home until 6 or 7 PM. He had a coworker, a young, single mother who worked all this overtime to help provide for her daughter. She contracted pneumonia, developed encephalitis, and died.

The workers at American Axle fought the tier system but were left isolated by the UAW bureaucracy. They were pitted against the workers in Mexico, and the union promoted a deal for a buy-out, buy-down. After the drastic cut in wages, the company still closed the plants in Hamtramck down and sent the work to Mexico.

If we were to unite internationally, workers like my husband wouldn't be thrown under the bus. They would work together in solidarity. What Will is saying opens up a whole new conversation. Everybody's feeling it, aware of the different struggles elsewhere, and that they are not alone. Many people feel it and just don't speak it. We desperately need this conversation.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**