

The final stage of the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president: The rank-and-file vs. the bureaucratic union apparatus

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10 November 2022

The election for the leadership of the United Auto Workers in the United States is in its final weeks. The court-appointed Monitor overseeing the election has given a date for the nearly 1 million workers in the UAW to send in their ballots of November 18, a week from now, to ensure they are received before the final deadline of November 28.

In these elections, there is one candidate that has given expression to the interests and aspirations of workers, Will Lehman, who is running for president of the UAW International. Lehman's campaign has become a focal point for a growing rank-and-file movement of workers in the US and internationally against the bureaucratic apparatus of the trade unions, which for decades has worked to suppress the class struggle.

The final election video, which introduced a campaign rally this past weekend, gave powerful expression to the impact of the Lehman campaign. It included video statements of dozens of workers explaining the catastrophic conditions they confront, the role of the UAW apparatus in working with the companies to enforce an unending series of concessions contracts and the desire of workers to fight.

Among the many workers who spoke at the meeting were several autoworkers from Silao, Mexico, who delivered an appeal for international unity. "The idea of workers fighting internationally is stupendous," one of the Mexican workers said. "Here in Mexico, people are very, very afraid to speak out. But by shaking off that fear, things would be different."

The election campaign has revealed certain basic truths about social and political relations, not only in the US but throughout the world.

First, it has exposed the vast social chasm that exists between rank-and-file workers and the apparatus of the unions, staffed with thousands of individuals whose income places them in the top 5 or even 1 percent of the population. Lehman's call for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace to transfer power from the apparatus to the shop floor is being turned into action, with workers at several major factories establishing such committees in recent weeks.

The UAW bureaucracy was forced to accept direct elections

for the first time due to a referendum, which was held only due to the massive corruption scandal that has sent several former UAW presidents and other top executives to prison. Faced with elections that they opposed even having, the UAW, along with its ruling class backers, wanted to keep the elections confined to candidates hand-picked by the apparatus, including the current president, Ray Curry, and longtime UAW bureaucrat Shawn Fain.

The campaign of Will Lehman has exploded these plans. For this reason, the bureaucrats in the UAW have done everything they can to limit voter turnout. They have done as little as possible to inform workers that there even is an election, let alone ensure that every worker receives a ballot and casts it in time to be counted.

Workers have reported that local UAW officials told temporary part-time (TPT) workers—the most exploited workers in the plants—that they cannot vote, which is a lie. Others report UAW officials telling workers that ballots had to be mailed by October 28, another lie.

With only one week left before ballots must be mailed in, many workers report not having received one, along with extreme difficulties in obtaining a ballot from the Monitor. As of November 10, only 86,396 ballots had been received, or less than 10 percent of the total UAW membership.

And just this week, the Monitor issued a notification to other candidates that the Ray Curry team had illegally used union resources to email an election campaign message to workers—just one expression of the efforts of the apparatus to utilize its control over the UAW to produce the desired outcome.

The conflict between the UAW apparatus and the workers, however, is only one expression of a universal process.

In the US, rail workers are in the midst of a pitched battle against union officials who are collaborating with management and the Biden administration to force through concessions contracts. The apparatus of the 12 unions that cover 100,000 railroad workers have repeatedly ignored workers' "no" votes and strike authorizations, forced them to vote on essentially the same contracts over and over again, pushed back strike

deadlines at the behest of the White House and Congress and threatened workers that if they fight they will be left on their own.

The same basic relationship exists in every country. In Canada, the major trade unions intervened this past weekend to strangle a general strike movement in Ontario triggered by the walkout of 55,000 education support workers. In the UK, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and its affiliated organizations have worked to block a growing strike movement of rail workers, communications workers, postal workers and other sections of the working class. In France, the Stalinist CGT union worked with the government of Emmanuel Macron to strangle a powerful strike of refinery workers last month.

Second, the campaign, in the course of organizing working class opposition, has exposed the reactionary character of the politics of racial and gender identity, long promoted by the organizations that operate in and around the Democratic Party.

The campaign video features workers of all races and genders supporting the campaign because it gives expression to their common class concerns. What is driving workers into struggle is not the selfish concerns of sections of the upper-middle class—focused on the allocation of positions based on race, gender and sexual orientation—but the realities of class exploitation: social inequality, soaring inflation, grueling work schedules, unsafe conditions and the prospect of mass layoffs.

While denouncing the WSWS as “sectarian” for refusing to work with the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus, when confronted with a genuine rank-and-file campaign that is winning enormous support among workers, the Democratic Socialists of America, *Labor Notes*, *Jacobin* magazine and countless other pseudo-left organizations respond with silence, and, when they must break their silence, outright hostility.

Third, the campaign has revealed the attraction of workers to socialism. Lehman has campaigned openly as a socialist and has used the campaign to explain to workers what socialism really is. The ruling class has long relied on lies and historical falsifications to separate workers from a historical understanding of the inextricable connection between the working class movement and socialism. This is breaking down.

As WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North wrote at the time of the Volvo Trucks strike last year, “The American working class is not frightened of revolution. Nor is it opposed to socialism. It just needs to understand what it offers as a solution and how it can be realized.”

The UAW election campaign also shows the basis for clearing away and undermining all the muck and filth of bourgeois politics—including the fascistic ravings of Trump and the Republicans as well as the reactionary identity politics of the Democrats. The midterm elections, which concluded this week, exposed more than anything else the sclerotic character of the entire ruling class political system under conditions of extreme social, economic and political crisis.

The warmongering of the ruling class and the conspiracy

against democratic forms of rule can only be opposed through the building of a socialist movement in the working class. This must itself be based on the development of the class struggle, which is only possible through the organization of a rank-and-file rebellion of the working class against the apparatus of the trade unions.

In the aftermath of the midterm elections, the American ruling class faces a social explosion. In addition to the looming confrontation with railroad workers, over 48,000 UAW members who are academic workers at the University of California are scheduled to strike next week; more than 22,000 dockworkers on the West Coast are working without a contract and are eager to strike; tens of thousands of pilots have rejected contracts or voted for strike authorization; health care workers confront a catastrophic winter as a surging pandemic is combined with an outbreak of flu and other respiratory illnesses; educators, overworked and understaffed, are working under intolerable conditions. All sections of the working class face inflation and the consequences of mass job cuts brought on by the Federal Reserve’s hiking of interest rates to increase unemployment and undermine wage demands.

In the aftermath of the elections, the Biden administration has called for bipartisan collaboration with the Republican Party co-conspirators of Trump. The desperate appeals for a fictional “national unity,” however, express extreme nervousness within the ruling class over the massive social eruption that is developing from below.

In the final weeks of the UAW elections, it is necessary to fight as aggressively as possible for the broadest possible turnout for Will Lehman, to defeat the efforts of the apparatus to suppress the vote. Whatever the outcome of the election, however, it marks a new stage in the class struggle in the US and internationally, which must be expanded and developed in the weeks and months ahead.

For more information on the campaign of Will Lehman, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.



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