

GE Aerospace workers in Ohio explain impact of UAW givebacks and why they are backing Will Lehman: “He’s for democratizing power back to the workers”

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For more information on Will Lehman’s campaign, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.

Two General Electric Aerospace workers, Joe and Jake, recently described conditions at their Cincinnati, Ohio area plant and why they were supporting Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman’s campaign for president of the United Auto Workers. Both are employed at GE’s Evendale, Ohio, facility where 500 UAW Local 647 members assemble, test and service aviation engines built by GE and its joint venture partner, French-based Safran Aircraft Engines.

Over the last four years, GE has accelerated its decades-long cost-cutting and restructuring drive, eliminating 44.4 percent of its global workforce, or 139,000 jobs. This includes 50,000 workers in the US and nearly one in every four in the aviation engine division. GE Aerospace is the world’s leading manufacturer of engines for commercial and military aircraft, including for Boeing, Airbus and the US military. Third-quarter profits for the division shot up more than 50 percent to \$1.3 billion, with profit margins of 18.7 percent, approaching pre-pandemic records.

“COVID and the Boeing 737 Max fiasco had a big impact on GE and our plant,” Joe, a worker with eight years at the Evendale plant, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Boeing pushed workers, under capitalism, to get production out, and as a result people died. At the same time, GE has moved a large portion of its jet engine work to nonunion factories,” in Alabama, New Hampshire and other states.

Joe referred to a strike at the Evendale plant in 1988 when 5,400 members of UAW Local 647 and 1,400 members of the International Association of Machinists Lodge 912 carried out two-month-long walkout. “In the 1980s, there was a strike against company demands to increase productivity by combining job classifications, consolidating work and eliminating jobs. Now you have some union leaders telling the workers, ‘Bust your butt and kill it or you won’t have a job.’ These young workers hear somebody in authority saying that and what else are they going to do?”

“In the old days, the last thing a supervisor wanted to see was a UAW committeeman. Now some supervisors actively seek out a committeeman when they are trying to get more work out of us and are encountering resistance.

“There was a non-written agreement that nobody would work overtime to make sure we don’t mess up or get hurt. The company convinced the local union president to tell us to work overtime or they were going to take the work away. Workers resisted, but three months later they got taken from the workers to take overtime, breaking solidarity. The work was taken from us regardless because that was always GE’s plan.”

Joe said the Evendale facility has been transformed into the new

headquarters of GE Aviation, now called GE Aerospace. “The CEO Lawrence Culp walks through the plant and it feels like the King Lord viewing his peasants to see how his crops are doing. It’s insulting to see how some union leadership colludes with him and the company.

“Over the last 10 years, the number of workers at the plant has fallen from 1,000 to about 500. There were layoffs, but most of the job cuts were through attrition. Workers retire or they quit, which was unheard of 20 years ago.

“Because they are not hiring, their solution is to bring back the ‘team’ concept and lean manufacturing. Team leaders do the supervisor’s job and workers are doing multiple jobs at one time. None of this is in the contract, but management says they are doing this to ‘empower you guys.’

“Some union reps completely buy into this. The assumption seems to be that the company holds all the power with respect to our jobs and therefore we have to collude and plead with the company to secure our jobs. UAW officials feel they have to prove that the union can comply with this ‘lean manufacturing,’ which only means doing more with less by cutting the workforce and enforcing market-based/tiered wages. But we know that lean manufacturing is just a way of gaining concessions and increasing profits and stock prices for the shareholders. It’s as anti-labor as the automation push was in the post-war period.

“They sell this team stuff by claiming it will lead to better working conditions and greater ‘autonomy.’ What it really means is to extract more labor and profits from the workers. Every year their mantra is we are making record profits. The second shift UAW committeeman has bought into the lies that this will protect jobs. He echoes management’s threats against us and lives by the motto of union collusion.

“It’s perverse and baseless. The assumption is that management holds the power, and the workers have none. We’ve told him, we reject your premise.

“There is certainly anxiety over peoples’ livelihoods. They can always pick up their capital and move to anywhere in the world. That’s the mobility of capital. But that is why I support Will’s push for working-class internationalism.

“I’m supporting Will firstly because he stands for democratizing power back to the workers. His vision of international and cross-sector workers’ solidarity and eliminating the Buy American dogma of nationalistic consumerism really makes sense along with the many other points in his campaign.

“Secondly, I support Will because he is a socialist. Capitalism is based on a single principle: naked self-interest. Socialism, to me, is the only option in our global neoliberal world economy that puts human

flourishing at its center, people not as means to an end, but ends in and of themselves. It's the only structure that has a heart. The fact that Will is openly running as a socialist, I think, shows a level of courage and dedication to a cause that the UAW needs."

Joe described his own political evolution. "I had a Road to Damascus experience. I used to follow right-wing politics and was extremely conservative. I didn't have any sense of the working class and the material interests behind politics. After about four-five years of this, the veil was lifted, and I realized what really matters. That's the interest of the working class. It's about living wages that build communities, being able to access and afford health care, education, working conditions, fighting for paid time off, and against the cutting of jobs for all sectors of workers. And realizing that this is the interest of workers internationally and not just the workers in our local."

Jake has worked at the Evendale plant for 10 years. He told the WSW, "I watched the debate between Will and the other UAW candidates for president. What struck me is what Will said about internationalism. All the other candidates were nationalistic. Will said there is no such thing as an American vehicle, we work with parts made by workers all over the world who have the same interests as us. We have to shift the power back to the workers."

"All the other candidates in the debate were run-of-the-mill. Will had substance and was different. When we saw Will's ad in *Solidarity Magazine* the two of us couldn't believe it. We said either he is a socialist or this is some right-wing guy posturing by using populist rhetoric. We started following Will. Then we got his letter calling for the freedom of Julian Assange, and we said this makes too much sense. It was great to have somebody speaking for us. We began speaking to guys at work and they say, 'I'll vote for him.' We know not all of them agree with socialism or understand it, but they see somebody who is giving them hope and has their interests as workers."

"Why should 12 people own everything while everyone else is suffering from the evils of capitalism? They tell us that this is the best it's ever going to get, and mankind can't progress anymore. No way. We agree with Will. We are going to have to fight for a better future."

Jake described how the UAW bureaucracy's collusion had led to a severe regression in workers' living standards and conditions.

"All we've been getting with the UAW for decades are concessions. Nobody wanted these rotten contracts, and workers voted against them, but they passed every time. We are the aerospace part of the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America. But our wages and benefits have not kept up with other aviation mechanics."

"The company has been trying to get two-tier wages, but the union officials know they couldn't get a contract passed with that. In 2017, GE tried to reopen our contract and introduce 'market-based wages' for new workers. The company said this was 'very competitive' pay, but the union said no. But they gave up other concessions, and workers hired after 2012 don't have pensions, as much vacation time and other benefits. We have a quasi-tier system because it takes new hires five years to get the 10 percent shift differentials. For years, GE has been trying to divide the new workers from those with 10 years and more."

Jake explained that there are several unions at General Electric, with the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) playing the leading role in the Coordinated Bargaining Committee (CBC) of GE unions.

During the last contract negotiations in 2019, Jake said, talks lasted until the final week before the expiration of the old contract. "The union told workers to prepare to strike if a provisional agreement was not reached by midnight Sunday. Many of the workers were sick of concessions and were ready to fight. Guys were bringing home their personal stuff and were ready to strike. However, a deal was struck behind closed doors by the IUE leader [Jerry Carney] behind the backs of the rest of the unions in the

CBC."

The UAW Local 647 leadership, he said, "then went on a campaign to try and convince the local guys to vote 'yes' on the contract. UAW officials said you have to accept the contract because it's the company's 'last, best, and final offer' and we had our UAW international area rep tell us in a union meeting not to expect to get anything better. In the end, the deal passed by only a few percentage points of the votes," Jake said. The contract "reduced overtime premiums for coming into work early from double time to time-and-a-half and increased by one hour how long you had to work to get overtime. They also took away COLA, our health care premiums went up and dental and vision was put on a paid premium tier."

"According to the company," Jake added wryly, "teeth are luxury bones. They want us to pay an extra \$50 a month to keep dental and vision care. Under a four-year contract our health care costs have gone up astronomically with our high deductible plans. Workers are always asking their spouses: 'Are the kids really sick enough to go to the doctor?' These conversations should never happen," he said.

Jake described the abusive conditions in the factory, enforced by management and the UAW, which endanger workers and those who fly in the planes. "The company gives out gift cards to get workers to speed up on inspections—for jet engines! That's their 'lean manufacturing.' They want to do more with less, and lean on the worker, especially the younger ones who don't know they have the right to refuse to do unsafe work. They have created an atmosphere of intimidation in the plants."

"We build massive jet engines that are thousands of pounds. During a snowstorm, the guys wanted to go home early so they would not be stuck in the storm. The supervisor said they couldn't go until they towed the engine they were working on to the test cells. They had to pull this engine with a tugger across a long distance within the two-mile campus outside in extreme inclement winter weather."

"There were a mix of new guys and seasoned guys, and they wanted to hurry because of the snowstorm. But the tugger jack-knifed with the engine in tow. Thank God nobody was hurt. Then one of these guys got their personal truck to try to push the engine and the tugger. These workers felt they couldn't say no and tell the supervisor that their lives were more important than his production deadlines. The supervisor responsible for this never received any punishment for his actions."

"All the new hires have been put on second shift, and a whole culture has been created where they are pitted against the older workers and vice versa. Some UAW leaders and management tell these younger workers, 'You're the ones who are going to save this plant.' The union leadership encourages this cut-throat culture, which is a gift to the company. They've bought into it entirely. The committeeman says, 'Work as fast as you can, work yourself out of a job, so I can advocate to bring in more work.' The new guys don't know any better because the company and the union are telling them the same thing."

Jake concluded, "GE is having trouble hiring and retaining workers because for the first time, workers are quitting for other jobs. This used to be the one of the most sought-after places to work in Cincinnati. If you had a job here, you were set for life. But all of that has changed."

Joe added, "My dad hired in at GE in 1978. I remember my mom driving me to the picket line in 1988 to drop off food for my dad. After the strike, jobs were decimated. The workforce fell from roughly 10,000 to just about 500 as of today. My dad was laid off and I remember that everybody's parents lost their jobs. He wasn't rehired until 2013."

Even as they claimed two-tier wages and other concessions would "save jobs," union officials colluded in the shutdown of GM assembly, brake and chassis plants in the area and the destruction of 75,000 manufacturing jobs in the Cincinnati-Dayton area between 2000 and 2015 alone.

"This area has faced years of deindustrialization and has been hit hard by the heroin and opioid crisis," Joe said. "You even have a sheriff here

saying, ‘Don’t give criminals Narcan, and let them die.’ That’s sick.

“Before getting a job at GE, I used to work at Ford’s Sharonville plant and the St. Bernard soap company. I was told working at Ford was like hitting the blue-collar lottery. But I saw the impact of the UAW accepting tiered wages. It divides the workforce with one guy making half as much as the guy working next to him. GE used to be a coveted job too. The only time someone left GE was when they retired or when they died. But we’ve seen years of stagnating wages.”

Joe concluded by pointing to the broader issues facing the working class, including the danger of nuclear war. “You go to work, and you see a big picture of [former GE CEO Jack] Welch and George W. Bush. A lot of our work is for the defense industry. I like the way Will put it: Workers have no interest in fighting wars against each other. The working class only has international interests. Wars pit the working class against the working class on behalf of the ruling class. It’s the workers, the poor farmers who die for the military industrial complex. And when you are at GE, you are in the belly of the beast.

“Now the politicians are saying, ‘All options are on the table’ when it comes to war with Russia and China. The logic of that is nuclear annihilation and the end of humanity. I used to follow right-wing, patriotic politics and nationalism. I would drive to work listening to Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh. But in 2008-2009, they started dogging the unions, saying that the high cost of legacy workers in the UAW had caused the recession. I had an episode of cognitive dissonance. I had been preaching this God Bless the USA gospel but then I got into GE, and I started taking some online courses. I began reading about labor history and the civil rights movement and began to realize what the real interests of the working class are.

“Those are the interests Will is fighting for. That’s why I support him.”

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