Chicago Ford Rank-and-File Election Committee member speaks out: “Workers have to unite”

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Rank-and-file workers at Ford Chicago Assembly Plant (Ford CAP) recently formed the Chicago Ford Rank-and-File Election Committee to support the campaign of Will Lehman, socialist candidate for United Autoworkers president. Will Lehman is campaigning for a program to abolish the corrupt union bureaucracy and place the power of the union back into the hands of the rank and file. His campaign calls for restoration of cost-of-living adjustments, a 50 percent pay increase for all autoworkers, immediate transition of temporary workers to full time, an end to the tier system, and more.

The committee at Ford in Chicago is part of a growing wave globally and among autoworkers in the US. This includes autoworkers in Detroit and Flint in Michigan, who are forming rank-and-file committees to begin organizing an independent fightback against the corporations and return power to rank-and-file workers. Members of the committee are working to raise awareness about Will’s campaign among workers in the plant.

A member of the Chicago Ford Rank-and-File Committee spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* about conditions in the plant that led him and other workers to support Will’s campaign.

The worker’s name, department and shift are withheld to prevent retaliation from both management and UAW functionaries. If you work at Ford Chicago Assembly or Stamping and you are interested in learning more about how to get involved in the rank-and-file committee, send an email to chifordrfc@gmail.com or text ?(773) 234-7135? for more information. To learn more about Lehman’s campaign, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.

What are conditions like on a daily basis?

The cleaning conditions are horrible. There are so many roaches that we have to bring our own bug spray to the plant. You have to spray when you see them because you don’t want to take them home with you. Also, they fly. I never knew that roaches flew before I worked at CAP, but they have wings just like beetles.

The bathrooms all are horrible. For a company with so much money to have such old toilets, sinks and hand dryers is ridiculous. We have appliances that were around since I was a kid! All the bathrooms look like they’re from the ‘60s, and I’ve seen fast-food bathrooms that are better. There’s no hot water, either. But they have all new bathrooms in the corporate offices.

This situation is ridiculous regarding water for workers. They didn’t even have water stations in the plant until this year. It could be 90 degrees outside and 100 degrees in the plant, and they forget to give us water. One time, one of the water machines had the pipe misconnected and it went to the bathroom’s water line, and there were feces in the water and ice.

Now, they’re taking away the versatility job since new plant management came in, so we are going to be in a situation where it’s harder to go to the bathroom. The versatility workers come in and cover work if we have to leave the line, because the line doesn’t stop. It will get harder to make the decision to have a snack and drink or go to the bathroom. You can get written up depending on your supervisor for going to the bathroom or taking too long on a break. You don’t know what someone’s situation is; they may have a medical condition that means they have to use the bathroom more than others.

The vending machines—a lot of workers are living off the food—are so outdated. There are old, half-frozen pizza puffs and burgers; not healthy at all. We spend most of our days there and we have hardly any time to go anywhere to get good food.

The plant has shut down for parts shortages off and on and we have to go on unemployment and collect supplementary unemployment benefits [SUB]. It’s a scam when corporations control unemployment. Unemployment caps at a certain amount, less than if you worked a regular week and taxes still get taken out. Making it worse, they’re laying us off so much.

The timing on SUB is against workers and pro-corporation. They will not pay you out until after two weeks have gone by, but some people go for a month without pay based on when their pay period starts. We don’t know why some people don’t have their pay period delayed. All of the money that the corporation saves on not paying workers on time, they see it as a bonus. It puts workers in a downward financial spiral because your taxes are taken out at a higher rate if the IRS decides your unemployment pay puts you in a higher tax bracket. The union lets the company get away with it, and that’s the worst part.

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Can you describe what it was like for workers who were forced to work when the pandemic first broke out?

The "lockdown" wasn't really a lockdown. It was about three weeks that we were off, and then we went right back at it while we were still getting unemployment checks. They didn't have enough information to be forcing us back in here, figuring it out on the fly what will stop the spread of COVID. They were trying to keep us away from each other, but there was no way to do that. We were touching the same things and the same people on the same job, and they put it on us to clean their stuff. People were getting sick, but they weren't telling us. They weren't quarantining areas.

A couple of people got COVID and they didn't have any more vacation days to take off work. People were coming into work when they knew they were sick. People were mad about that, it was happening so much. They had to use their own time off and some people couldn't take time off. In my section, they shut the shift down and sent everyone home one day. They didn't tell us until a few days later that someone was there who was working sick.

We didn't even see the union during this time. The union rep went on medical and stayed home while we were coming in to work. They didn't even have any union meetings during this time. I can't believe they couldn't even get one online. I heard they went on vacation, and we probably paid for it with our dues if they did.

Can you describe what the tier system is like? How does it affect pay and morale for all workers in the plant?

They pay outside skilled trades workers when they already have workers who are in the plant and in the union. If they have extra work, they should pay them extra to do the work, not bring in outside companies. That exploits the skilled trades' labor. They don't want to hire more skilled trades workers, raise pay or make getting certified less exclusive. It shouldn't take 10 years to get into skilled trades.

If you keep something small and exclusive, it gets easier to keep people divided, but it also makes your production less efficient. They have it so the only way to get a better wage is to get into skilled trades, so some people are there just for the income and not because they really like the work. But if you paid everyone the same across the jobs, then they could have better quality of production. As long as they have us just surviving, people are going to be scared. The union allows it, and the corporations know it.

It takes too long to reach top pay. You come in at $15 an hour and top out at $30 an hour, but takes six years to get there. [Big box retailer] Target hires at $15 an hour, but your life is not usually in danger working there. People are dying in this plant for $15 an hour. That will affect the attitude and quality of work.

I know a lot of people whose lives are in shambles. One man has been walking to work, for miles, for two years, and he's probably in his 50s. Obviously he isn't making enough to have a car or get a Lyft. Public transport around here is not close to the plant and it doesn't travel in all directions.

One worker who just started was living out of his car. I heard another worker talking to him about it, telling him he should tell the union. The new worker said he did tell them, and they just told him that he could sleep in the union parking lot in his car. As a temp, you are a sacrificial lamb. You are hardly getting paid and you have to pay union dues. They almost act like they want children doing the job, because they treat us like kids and pay us like kids, but they expect us to be "professional."

Can you explain why you're supporting Will Lehman for UAW President? How has his campaign been received by workers in the plant?

A lot reps and union officials have been helped into their spot by someone in management. It's a buddy-buddy system with the union on the corporate side. That's the corruption right there. The only time you see the chairman is when they're with management. The union reps even walk like management and move like them when they walk through the plant.

Most of my issues I have had to deal with myself. The union rep only comes in to take the credit. What am I paying them to do? They rely solely on disciplinary action, and that's how you know the union is corporate. The union's concerns should be the workers, their health and safety, the work environment. They shouldn't be the same as corporate. The union helps management in writing people up for things like faulty equipment that is not even their responsibility. Why are they writing workers up? They should be getting the company to change the job processes if things keep going wrong.

The union bureaucracy is getting too comfortable. It is obvious to us what they're doing, but they seem like they don't see that.

Now with the technology we can connect directly with each other. They can't block us from telling the truth to one another. I was looking at Will's page and they were talking about the wages and that everyone's not making enough.

When we come together we can be in control of our needs being spoken for. That is what corporate is scared of.

We have to get the word out, because everyone knows things can't keep going like this. Everyone's watching us now, and something has to happen. If everyone stands together and steps back from the line, that's power.

Workers shouldn't be afraid to organize. Workers have to unite. That's where the power is.

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