

Striking CNH workers speak from the pickets: “We need to fight like a united movement of workers”

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Work at CNH? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us what you think are the main issues in the strike and what you’re fighting for.

Nearly eight months into their strike, approximately 1,200 CNH Industrial workers in Racine, Wisconsin, and Burlington, Iowa, continue to demonstrate enormous courage in their struggle. The workers, who produce agricultural and construction equipment and are members of the United Auto Workers, are determined to secure better wages, benefits and working conditions.

On Saturday, supporters of Will Lehman, a second-tier rank-and-file worker at Mack Trucks and candidate for UAW president, spoke to CNH workers on the picket lines in Racine, Wisconsin.

Campaigners distributed a statement by Lehman calling for the mobilization of workers throughout the UAW in order to win the strike, as well as demanding that CNH workers receive their full income from the UAW’s more than \$800 million strike fund.

At the picket line, where rank-and-file workers endured bitterly cold temperatures, Lehman’s statement was greeted with enthusiasm and support. Lehman also briefly addressed the workers over a video call to extend his solidarity. A number of workers noted they had not received ballots in the first round of the UAW national elections, providing further confirmation of what the WSWs has described as a “massive vote suppression operation” by the UAW apparatus.

Paul, a veteran Case and then CNH worker who worked at the plant for 47 years, described the long-term erosion of living standards at the company and its predecessors.

“When I started here in 1975, the benefit package was much better than it is now,” he said. “Wages were better, if you factored in inflation. We had a pension, our insurance was better. All the way around it was better.

“If you flash forward to now, the company we work for, CNH, they don’t want to give you anything. You have to fight for everything. It’s especially bad considering what their profits are. There aren’t many tractor manufacturing companies in the market anymore, so they don’t have as much competition. So they don’t have a lot of excuses to do what they’re doing.”

CNH, a transnational corporation, made \$7.5 billion in gross profits last year, handed out hundreds of millions to shareholders and spent millions on stock buybacks. CEO Scott Wine had a pay package of over \$21 million in 2021. The company exploits a workforce of over 31,000 worldwide, with 10 plants in the US and dozens more in Europe, Latin America and Asia.

CNH is part of a portfolio of companies, including Stellantis (formed from the merger of Fiat Chrysler and the PSA Group) and Ferrari, which are owned by the billionaire Agnelli family dynasty. Stellantis is currently engaged in a ruthless job-cutting campaign against workers in Belvedere,

Illinois, and in Warren, Michigan, as well as seeking to impose concessions on autoworkers in Italy.

Paul also spoke about the fact that the unionized CNH workers make less than their non-union counterparts, an indictment of the UAW’s role in aiding the company’s exploitation of the workforce. “We’re pitted against other plants that are also non-union. Those plants for the most part are paid better, and they have better benefits, which is very unusual. It always used to be that union plants had generally better benefits and better pay. We’re trying to change some of that with our strike.”

UAW holds “solidarity” rallies in Racine and Burlington while isolating strike

Throughout the strike, the UAW apparatus has done nothing to mobilize all-out support among autoworkers, John Deere and Caterpillar workers. On the contrary, it has worked assiduously to isolate and starve out the striking workers. The UAW national headquarters has posted nothing about the strike on uaw.org since May, the month the strike began.

Workers have been strung out on \$400 a week of strike pay from the UAW’s gigantic strike fund, forcing workers to take second jobs. The UAW bureaucracy rescinded an increase in strike pay at the UAW convention this summer, lowering it from \$500 a week back to \$400.

Thus, it was not surprising that a UAW-sponsored “solidarity rally” in Racine over the weekend was only sparsely attended by rank-and-file workers, with much of the attendees comprised of officials from the UAW and other unions.

UAW Local 180 President Yasin Mahdi complained at the rally, “We started negotiating with the company back in March. I just don’t understand why it is so hard to come up with a fair agreement for 2023. Here we are in December still asking the company to present a fair offer. It would be a fabulous Christmas present.”

Counting on the UAW bureaucracy to isolate the striking CNH workers, the company has gone on the offensive from the start, cutting off workers’ health insurance and bringing in scabs.

The company presented a “last, best and final offer” in September, which subsequently expired on October 14. The UAW bargaining team declined to bring the proposal to a vote, evidently fearing that it would be overwhelmingly rejected, as workers have done at John Deere, Volvo Trucks and elsewhere since 2021.

The latest proposal from CNH is reportedly even worse than the September offer, with a ratification bonus declining from \$5,000 to \$4,000, a 23 percent wage increase over a 4 year contract (effectively a

pay cut with current rates of inflation), and the 5 percent cap on health care premiums also taken away.

The growing support among rank-and-file CNH workers for Lehman's program—including abolishing the UAW bureaucracy and transferring power to the shop floor—has provoked increasing anxiety top UAW officials.

At the rally Saturday, Brandon Campbell, UAW Region 4 director, falsely claimed that Lehman's statement calling for support for the CNH workers was prohibited by the UAW election rules. Campbell (whose UAW salary before he was regional director already topped \$136,000) attempted to intimidate Lehman's supporters, taking photos of them—an actual violation of the UAW election rules.

“We need to fight like a united movement of workers”

Paul, the veteran worker, recalled that a strike-turned-lockout at CNH in 2004-05 was sold out by the UAW bureaucracy, which imposed massive concessions, including the wage and benefit tier system.

“The 2004 strike was a turning point for the company and the union,” he said. “Up until then we had equal pay and equal benefits among the membership. Everyone had a pension. The company decided they were going to put the hammer down. Our insurance was basically gutted. Pensions went away for new employees. They established a tier wage system which created a lot of animosity in the union plants, which remains in effect to this day. It was very, very demoralizing.

“We were on strike, and we didn't get anything,” he added. “What happened was everyone was kind of in the dark up until the very end. It's very similar to what's going on now. The company walked away, there were no discussions, then it seemed like at the last minute the membership was notified that they had something they wanted us to look at and vote on. And everything went boom-boom-boom. We didn't have time to study the deal—everything happened quickly. Unfortunately, part of it was that people were worn out.”

Then-UAW Region 4 Director Dennis Williams, later the president of the UAW, played a key role in isolating the CNH workers and imposing the concessions. Williams ended up in prison for his role in the conspiracy to embezzle workers' dues as he enforced company-friendly agreements and was embroiled in a massive corruption scandal.

“I'm old enough to remember contracts in the past—everything was pattern bargaining,” the worker added. “In many ways, it was a good thing. Generally speaking, what John Deere or Caterpillar got, we tried to get the same. When Fiat got on board, they could care less what those other people got. They don't care. That set the stage. Because there was always some kind of parity. Deere was never that far ahead of us in terms of wages and benefits, we were all in the same boat. Now the discrepancies are big.”

The worker spoke out on the need to fight back and mobilize the working class, solidarizing himself with the struggle of railroad workers, who have faced a bipartisan assault on their rights. In recent weeks, Congress and the White House moved rapidly to enact legislation blocking a national rail strike and imposing a pro-corporate settlement.

“I didn't agree with the government attacking the right to strike by the rail workers for better benefits, pay. See there's strength in numbers. When I started, we had 3,300 hourly employees in the Case plant in 1975. Whenever we did have a disagreement, the company was called Tenneco at the time, it generally was resolved within a few weeks because we went out on strike, with all our sister plants following suit. They usually gave in, and they gave us what we wanted. That's where the power came from.

We need to do that again, fight like a united movement of workers in every CNH plant.”

“There's a lot of families right now who are struggling”

Vance, a younger CNH worker on the pickets, also spoke about his experiences on strike. He pointed to the struggles of working class youth being expressed in the strike and brought together with the older generations of workers.

“I've been on strike for eight months. Some of us have been out here longer than they've been at CNH. I worked at CNH for seven months, and this is my first strike ever.”

Pointing to a quote by another worker on Lehman's leaflet, he said, “That's me right there, ‘Some of us have been on strike longer than we've worked at CNH.’”

“It would be cool to be out here with more autoworkers from the area. The more faces that people can see when they look outside, the more they can support us because they need to know things are wrong on the inside. There's a lot of families right now who are struggling. Their Thanksgivings weren't the same this year, and their Christmases won't be the same because they can't do a lot of things that they used to do because of the financial circumstances that the company has got us in.

“They start us at \$19.26 an hour. It's hard to get by especially if you have a family, and they take out for medical, dental and vision and Social Security, and it's not much at the end of the day. Sometimes the company doesn't even want to give you enough hours because there are part shortages and they decide to shut down.

“Everybody's situation is so different. I'm a single young person so I don't need as much as someone who's out here who has a family, who I am also fighting for because they have people who depend on them. We all have to pay these high outrageous deductibles for health care, like \$13,000 before your insurance actually kicks in.”

The young worker heard about the Biden administration and rail union's collaboration to block a national of railroad workers by declaring it illegal. “That's crazy,” he responded. “I don't necessarily agree with the two political parties. I think it should be about the people and not about political parties' interests.”

He was also unaware of the details of the UAW corruption scandal that led to the referendum that workers voted on to directly elect international officials, but heard from older workers about past betrayals of the union leadership in past contract struggles.

“Some of the older workers have been here for 20 to 30 years, and they talked to us about how they've lost certain things in other contracts because the bargaining committees allowed it. That's why people who work here don't have as much as they used to anymore.”

Referring to the resurgence of the class struggle and the fight against inequality, he said, “Even schools perpetuate the notion that you should accept things as they are if you're a worker. They don't teach a lot about our history.

“I've heard about strikes but I never really knew what it entailed or the toll it could take on families until now,” he said. “I feel like our generation cares so much. I've seen people who are older, younger, gay, straight, black, white, women and men who are out striking and calling people out who are in power. Really, we just want common decency, we want everyone to be treated fairly. All of this shows that we really care and that we're willing to stand together when we see some injustice going on in the world.”



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