

Socialist candidate Will Lehman exposes massive voter suppression in the UAW elections

Tom Carter
30 December 2022

On December 19, UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman filed a formal protest to the results of the 2022 officer elections “in their entirety.”

Lehman’s written protest to the court-appointed monitor overseeing the ballot is an encyclopedic historical record of the election, comprehensively detailing every facet of the antidemocratic conspiracy by the entrenched bureaucracy to cling to power by suppressing the vote.

The 50-page protest and dozens of pages of attachments, compiling information gathered through the growing networks of rank-and-file members that were established in the course of Lehman’s campaign, demonstrate that the bureaucracy repeatedly violated American labor law and that the election was illegal.

Lehman, the only socialist candidate in the election, won nearly 5,000 votes among rank-and-file auto and academic workers from across the country. But unless his protest is upheld, his name will be excluded from the runoff election next month, which will be limited to the leading candidates of the union’s bureaucratic apparatus, Ray Curry and Shawn Fain, each of whom earned less than 4 percent of the total eligible votes amid massive voter suppression.

One million out of 1.1 million eligible members did not vote in the election because the UAW leadership deliberately kept them in the dark. This is not a matter of opinion but of provable fact. Lehman’s protest describes, for example, how the UAW national “Member News” web page, which is incorporated into many local union web sites, made no reference to the election whatsoever between July 29 and November 29.

While it maintained a conspiracy of silence around the union’s internal elections, the bureaucracy devoted vast resources to campaigning for the Democratic Party in the national midterm elections. In those elections, which took place at the very same time as the union election, the bureaucracy utilized advanced techniques, organized public events, and bombarded union members with advertising in an effort to increase turnout by reminding workers of voting deadlines.

There is no innocent explanation for this contrast. If the union had spent the same resources on its own election as it did supporting Democrats in the midterms, the turnout would have indisputably been far higher.

Adequate notice is a basic requirement for any election to be considered democratic. Workers cannot vote in an election that they do not even know is happening.

The UAW bureaucracy had a clear improper motive to suppress the

vote. The bureaucrats feared that an informed membership would boot them out, depriving them of their bloated six-figure salaries, their access to the \$1.5 billion in assets that have been built up with workers’ dues money, and all their rotten direct and indirect perks.

Lehman’s protest documented how what little notice the union did give was largely through a communication channel—the Local Union Information System (LUIS)—which had been set up for the bureaucracy to communicate with itself, and which “cut out the membership,” in the words of US district judge David Lawson at a hearing in the *Lehman v. UAW* case in November.

The result: the union officials and their associates generally learned about the election and voted, but the rank and file generally did not. This skewed the vote in favor of the candidates favored by the bureaucracy and suppressed the vote for Lehman, whose campaign reflected the interests and aspirations of the rank and file.

The lack of notice was compounded by widespread defects in the union’s mailing and email lists, which the union obstinately refuses to properly maintain, which resulted in more ballots being returned in the mail as undeliverable than were actually cast. Many workers who did learn about the election, in many cases only through the Lehman campaign, were still unable to vote because they could not obtain a ballot in time.

In November, Lehman filed a lawsuit requesting a 30-day extension to the deadlines for workers to request and mail ballots. This request was denied after it was opposed by the Biden administration’s Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, by attorneys representing the UAW apparatus, and by the court-appointed monitor.

“If ballots continue to be sent at this rate each day through the November 28 deadline,” Lehman warned in the lawsuit, “total turnout will be roughly 104,000.” Lehman’s warning was strikingly precise. As it turned out, a total of 104,776 ballots were counted.

The 9 percent turnout was one of the lowest turnouts of any direct union election in American history, if not the lowest of all time. But the percentage turnout among the West Coast academic workers was even lower, pointing to deliberate discrimination against these newer members who were less likely to vote for the candidates of the entrenched apparatus.

For example, Local 4123, which, according to its website, has “over 11,000 members,” was sent only 2,296 ballots, of which only 29 were returned.

UAW Local 5810, which represents academic researchers and post-doctoral scholars, cast only 328 votes in the election for national officers, and then weeks later cast 4,756 votes on a contract

ratification. This proves irrefutably that it was lack of notice that caused the low turnout—not “apathy,” an insulting lie now being promulgated by the bureaucracy and its accomplices.

Lehman’s protest also documents systematic intimidation directed against campaign volunteers at workplaces across the country, including an implicit threat of physical violence by UAW Region 4 Director Brandon Campbell on December 17.

In addition, Lehman’s protest documents how the union deliberately misinformed members about voting deadlines and eligibility in an effort to suppress the vote, telling Temporary Part-Time (TPT) workers that they could not vote even if they received a ballot, and telling workers at GM Arlington in Texas and elsewhere that the voting deadline had already passed when it had not.

Crowning this mountain of misconduct, like a cherry on top, is the fact that Will Lehman’s own vote was evidently not counted, despite the fact that he mailed his ballot well before the deadline.

“If the UAW was a country,” Lehman writes in the protest, “would it be called a democracy?” At 9 percent, the turnout was less than half that of the country with the lowest turnout for national elections in the world, Haiti. It is a lower voter turnout than in countries that *The Economist’s* Democracy Index classifies as “authoritarian regimes.”

This year’s direct elections, which are the first in the history of the UAW, were forced on the union by a years-long corruption scandal that resulted in numerous members of the union’s executive board, including two past presidents, being convicted or pleading guilty to criminal conspiracies against the membership. The US Department of Justice described a “culture of corruption” among these supposed “labor leaders,” who spent millions of dollars of workers’ dues money on grotesquely luxurious personal lifestyles while taking bribes from management to bind their members to unfavorable contracts.

The American government imposed a court-appointed monitor and the prospect of direct elections on the UAW, not out of any great love of labor democracy, but because the union bureaucracy otherwise could not have survived. The election was seen as a way to rehabilitate a union that for decades has served as a key instrument for keeping workers’ economic demands in check, for keeping workers politically under the thumb of the Democratic Party, and for promoting the interests of US imperialism abroad.

Will Lehman’s formal protest now presents the union, the Biden administration and the court-appointed monitor with a dilemma: (1) acknowledge that the socialist candidate is right and rerun the election, further destabilizing a key pillar of capitalist rule in America, or (2) plow ahead with the election results that increasing numbers of rank-and-file members will never recognize as legitimate.

There is no question that throughout this election, it was Will Lehman and those supporting his campaign who were at the forefront of the fight for the interests and democratic rights of rank-and-file workers in opposition to management, the Biden administration, the union apparatus and the court-appointed monitor.

This fight is being waged as a new revolutionary cycle opens up and massive social forces are increasingly on the move across every industry worldwide. Directly and indirectly, in many different forms, workers are coming up against the profit system and its defenses and defenders.

In the trade unions, this manifests itself as a rebellion of the rank and file against the corrupt nationalist bureaucracies, which respond in turn with antidemocratic and authoritarian methods. In this context, the Lehman campaign objectively represents the sharpest manifestation of a class-conscious element within this overall

dynamic.

If Lehman had not been a candidate in the UAW elections, it is likely that massive voter suppression would still have taken place, if not to the same vicious extent. But without the active participation of a socialist candidate in the elections, the full scope of the bureaucracy’s antidemocratic conspiracies against the membership would not have been so completely revealed, in full view of hundreds of thousands of rank-and-file members and retirees.

It is the active work of Lehman and like-minded workers and supporters—who responded to calls for volunteers, who stood in front of factory turnstiles with leaflets, and who refused to back down in the face of intimidation and retaliation—who have made all this possible. A genuinely socialist campaign, without exaggeration, transformed the political dynamic of the election entirely.

The UAW apparatus would now prefer to forget about the election and carry on with business as usual. But as much as the bureaucracy might like to pretend the election was legitimate, it was not, neither from a legal standpoint nor in the eyes of growing numbers of members. Lehman’s formal protest is only the first step in the campaign for a rerun of the election in which the membership will genuinely express its democratic will.

“I am making this protest on my own behalf as a member and a candidate, as well as on behalf of one million of my union brothers and sisters who did not vote in this election,” Lehman wrote in the protest. “Whether they would have voted for me or for another candidate, we all had a right to participate in a meaningful democratic election—which this election was not.”

Lehman’s campaign was never limited to just drumming up votes. It was about building the foundations of rank-and-file power, about asserting the independent needs and aspirations of the working class, and about challenging the influence of the corrupt anti-worker bureaucracy.

With Lehman’s formal protest against the election results, this campaign now enters a new phase, and it is critical that the contents of the protest be circulated and discussed as widely as possible.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact