

GM Flint workers speak out on UAW voter suppression, plant conditions

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As the United Auto Workers bureaucracy and court-appointed UAW Monitor move ahead with a “runoff election” between two representatives of the union apparatus, rank-and-file UAW members continue to denounce the illegitimate character of the election process. As a result of deliberate voter suppression by the UAW bureaucracy, only 9 percent of the union’s 1.1 million eligible voters participated in the first round of voting. This was one of the lowest, if not the lowest, turnout in any national union election.

On December 19, Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania and socialist candidate for UAW president, filed a formal protest over the conduct of the UAW apparatus in the election and demanded the election be re-contested or, as an alternative, that all five of the original candidates be included in the runoff. As of this writing, Lehman has received no response to these issues from the Monitor.

Two workers at General Motors’ Flint Assembly plant spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* last week about the election. They also commented on the poor conditions regarding health and safety in the shop.

Greg, a full-time worker at the Flint Assembly plant, said, “The protest was absolutely necessary, not just for Will Lehman but for 1 million people in the UAW. This was the first election in UAW history, and it was held *because* of corruption in the union leadership. The federal Monitor didn’t monitor anything.”

Asked whether the extremely low voter turnout in the election was due to workers’ “apathy,” as was claimed by Curry supporter Debi Kirchner in the Local 598 (GM-Flint) newspaper, the *Eye Opener*, Greg was adamant. “Apathetic? No. Not informed. Some people didn’t even get their ballots.”

Greg contrasted the UAW bureaucracy’s silence on its own election with their energetic promotion of the Democrats in the federal midterm elections. “For the UAW election, there was maybe one poster in the plant. For the midterms, they put ads in the union newspapers and sent out

mailings to all the employees.”

Lindsey, a temporary part-time (TPT) worker in the plant, also saw a difference between the union leadership’s treatment of the UAW election and the midterms: “Many notices, flyers, information in general were posted around the plant, and we received mail, like physical mail, about the midterms. We were even scheduled a day off to vote in the midterm, which again was made explicitly known to us.”

As for the UAW election, Lindsey was outraged over the UAW bureaucracy’s effort to strip workers of their right to vote. “Every worker should have been told by local union committee people that there was an election and they should vote, but they didn’t do that. They could have done something more if they were concerned with getting people to vote. That’s not negligence. That was a conscious choice on the part of the union.”

Asked why the union leadership would suppress the vote, Lindsey said, “Obviously, if you have a fully informed voter base, then that would pose a great risk of voting out who’s currently in power. So they wanted to limit the number of individuals who knew about the election.”

Greg answered in much the same way. “The bureaucracy repressed the vote because they’re working with management, and they’re afraid they could get thrown out.”

A major argument in Lehman’s protest concerns the UAW’s Local Union Information System (LUIS). For the election, the UAW relied on the LUIS system’s mailing list to get ballots out to the membership. This was despite the fact that the Monitor had found the system to have significant shortcomings during the 2021 referendum when members voted for direct elections of top officers.

As Lehman stated in his protest:

In its referendum report, the Monitor noted that “At the onset of the monitorship, the UAW did not have a sufficiently accurate or comprehensive centralized mailing list for its members.” The report also noted that “not all Local Unions routinely

uploaded (or even had the technological capacity to routinely upload) that information to LUIS. The UAW's mailing list therefore required significant attention."

To put the matter briefly, the Monitor had instructed the locals that they had to update their mailing lists in LUIS. In his protest and a subsequent presentation of evidence, Lehman established that at the time of the referendum (election), only a handful of locals had done so. Therefore, as Lehman had made clear, hundreds of thousands of eligible voters may not have received ballots.

In a hearing held on November 22, 2022, in *Lehman v. UAW*, attorneys for the UAW and the Monitor attested that the LUIS system was designed as a means of communication and data sharing between the International and the locals. That is, it had only ever been used by the bureaucracy, for the bureaucracy. As Judge Lawson said in the hearing, LUIS "kind of cut out the membership."

Lindsey, who is familiar with Lehman's protest and the failure of the LUIS system, drew this conclusion: "I would say it [the UAW's handling of the election] is totally undemocratic and would make any election that is supposed to be democratic illegitimate, given that the outcome would not represent the wants or will of the eligible voters.

"Now that the illegitimate runoff is underway, we're being bombarded with election posters at every work desk and break table. The big posters are everywhere in the plant including in the glass cases. I've received at least five different mailers at home. There was nothing like this for the first election."

Lindsey continued, "On Saturday, shop chairman Eric Welter posted a reminder on the UAW 598 cell phone app where he answers various questions submitted by the membership. He wrote, 'The ballots for the international union officers have been sent out and you should already have received them. Please fill it out put it in your mailbox, no postage is needed. This is your right as a member in good standing please take a couple moments and exercise that right.'"

On Sunday, she explained, the following exchange between Welter and a worker appeared on the local union app:

Q: I was never sent a ballot the first time and didn't receive a ballot this time. Not sure what I can do.

A: Contact the union hall then can assist in getting a replacement

Greg explained further, "This app was never used during the first round of voting to give us any information about the election, about ballots, deadlines or anything. This already set-up technology was never used for the first election round. This shows me they deliberately chose to keep us in the dark."

Both Greg and Lindsey also spoke about unsafe conditions in the plant, which the UAW bureaucracy has allowed. Commenting on a recent injury of a worker in the Chassis Department, Lindsey explained, "This woman was working on one job that uses a particularly heavy tool, and it malfunctioned while in operation. Not because of user error, just because the machine itself was not functioning. It rose up and hit her in the head."

Lindsey recounted management's response: "The line was stopped for a very brief amount of time while this woman, who was bleeding on her forehead was sent to the medical office and only got a butterfly bandage. This woman was told, like what was under an hour after experiencing this injury, she was told to go back to the same job on the machine that injured her."

Greg observed, "They just keep the line running, and it doesn't matter if you get hurt or not. The union just comes and they hardly talk to you, but in reality they're just going to do what the company wants."

Lindsey identified the Chassis Department as "the grimmest, most dangerous part of the plant. It was 95 degrees there last summer. They prefer to put new workers in that area, and of course, that's the temp workers.

"Roughly six years ago on Chassis One, a TPT was working with a tool. To keep up with the line, they overextended the machine, and the tool snapped back causing a broken neck and left him permanently disabled. That's just one example of the conditions in the plant."



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