

# “A strike is the only thing they’re going to listen to”: Kentucky Ford workers look ahead to contract battle in the wake of illegitimate UAW election

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Autoworkers in Kentucky were outraged to learn of the deliberate voter suppression by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy during the first-ever direct election of top UAW officers by rank-and-file workers. The union and court-appointed UAW Monitor are currently conducting a runoff election between two longtime bureaucrats who were declared the two top vote getters in a first round of voting, which effectively excluded 90 percent of the membership.

Last week, supporters of Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and a candidate for UAW president in the first round of voting, spoke with Ford workers in Louisville, Kentucky about the official protest Lehman filed, which challenges the results of the first round. The 50-page protest, filed with the court-appointed UAW Monitor on December 19, documents the UAW bureaucracy’s failure to update members’ mailing addresses and an extensive information blackout about the first round of the election.

Will’s official protest has prevented the results of the first election from being certified. That hasn’t stopped UAW officials and the monitor from continuing the runoff election between incumbent UAW president Ray Curry and UAW International Representative Shawn Fain—neither of whom garnered votes from more than 4 percent of the membership.

Many workers said they did not receive ballots for the first round of voting. Many others, particularly younger workers, said they were unaware that the first round of voting was even taking place. In contrast to the initial election, UAW officials are plastering the factories and union halls with signs reminding workers to get their ballots in by February 17 and emails with numbers to call if they have not received ballots and reminding them to vote.

Anger at the deliberate suppression of workers’ right to choose their leadership is particularly acute given the fact that 150,000 Ford, GM and Stellantis workers in the US and another 22,000 in Canada face a decisive contract battle in

mid-September. Whoever wins the runoff will oversee negotiations and workers do not trust either one of the candidates with their fate.

After years of UAW-backed concessions, rank-and-file workers want large wage increases, the restoration of cost-of-living protections (COLA), the abolition of the two-tier wage system, the rollover of all part-time workers and substantial pensions and health care improvements for retirees. The automakers and their Wall Street investors, however, are determined to slash labor costs and use the transition to electric vehicle production to destroy jobs and create a largely at-will, low-wage workforce.

Josh, a worker at the Kentucky Truck Plant, told the WWS, “Striking during the upcoming contract is the only thing they are going to listen to. It’s the only way things will change. Don’t get me wrong. I don’t want to go on strike. I just want to come in, do my job, and go home. But that’s not good enough.”

A veteran KTP worker of 38 years, Wayne says he will retire with a pension, but worries, “I have nephews and family who won’t get a pension. We need to bring back pensions for all!”

Gigi has worked at KTP for seven years. She said, “I didn’t retire with the 2018 contract because I knew I would get screwed. I have been waiting for this upcoming contract to roll around—but I am really starting to get worried about it. Something really needs to change.”

Will Lehman won 128 votes at UAW Local 862—which included KTP and the nearby Louisville Assembly Plant. This signaled strong support for his call for the abolition of the UAW apparatus, the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor through the setting up of rank-and-file committees, and the internationalist and socialist program Lehman is fighting for.

Workers expressed frustration as their already depressed

wages are being stretched ever thinner by the inflation caused by interest rate hikes and corporate profiteering.

Josh declared, “Everything is going up. Look at how much eggs cost. Meanwhile I have family members in here who have been here for over 20 years, and they are still making the same dollar. Top out pay hasn’t really changed, and we just can’t keep living with costs rising every single year.”

“What does Ray Curry do to earn \$500,000?” one worker asked. “I could definitely use more in my paycheck. I’ve got \$70 to my name.”

Ford is carrying out a global assault on workers’ jobs and conditions. On Wednesday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, “Ford Motor Co. is planning to slash 3,800 jobs in Europe over the next three years to lower costs and boost profit as it continues to shift toward electric vehicles, the auto maker said Tuesday.”

The bulk of the job cuts would primarily hit Ford’s European product-development staff, including 2,300 jobs at Ford’s German operations in Cologne and Aachen, another 1,300 jobs in the UK, and 200 in other European countries. This does not include the 4,600 hourly workers at Ford’s Saarlouis, Germany plant, where production of the Ford Focus compact is due to end in 2025.

Workers at the Louisville Assembly Plant were laid off this week due to parts shortages and production problems with the 2023-model of the Escape SUV. Although workers are set to return on February 20, production has been day to day for the last several weeks, with work stopping midweek earlier this month.

Last November, the *Automotive News* declared that “the future is in doubt” for the Louisville plant and its 4,000 workers, referring to threats made by Ford CEO Jim Farley, who placed a question mark over the assignment of future production to the factory ahead of the 2023 contract negotiations with the UAW.

The *Automotive News* article added that other plants were on the chopping block. “Louisville Assembly won’t be the only plant at the center of next year’s talks. The futures of GM’s Chevrolet Malibu plant in Kansas City, Kansas, and Stellantis’ Jeep Cherokee plant in Belvidere, Illinois, also are up in the air.”

In an open letter to the workers at Louisville Assembly last November, Lehman declared, “Far from defending jobs, the UAW is openly collaborating in their destruction. Ford is shutting the Romeo Engine plant outside of Detroit based on the 2019 UAW-Ford contract. Stellantis (Chrysler) has slashed jobs at Trenton Engine, Warren Truck and the Warren and Sterling stamping plants—all in the Detroit area.”

He continued, “This corporate terrorism must be halted! I call for the full mobilization of all rank-and-file workers in the UAW to halt any further layoffs or concessions. It is

time to draw a line in the sand: The rights of workers must take precedence over private profit!”

Insisting that the traditional slogan of the workers’ movement—An injury to one is an injury to all!—must be revived, Lehman called for workers to prepare for a national strike to fight mass layoffs and plant closures, with full strike pay to all workers. Since the UAW bureaucracy opposed this, he insisted, workers had to build rank-and-file committees as new centers of decision-making power in the plants. A strike also had to be connected to fight against exhausting and dangerous conditions.

He continued, “If the companies say less labor is needed to produce electric vehicles, then the rational policy would be to reduce the workweek from 40 to 30 hours with no loss in pay. Of course, the reality is that many of us are forced to labor 50, 60, 70 or even more hours to make ends meet. But this means that wages must be massively increased, and COLA reinstated, so no worker has to destroy their health and family life to pay bills and put food on the table.”

Finally, Lehman said autoworkers had to fight the global strategy of the auto giants with an international strategy of their own. The coordination of struggles against national borders required building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, said Lehman. “Our enemies are not the workers in Mexico, China, Japan or other countries, as the nationalist UAW officials would have us believe. Nothing terrifies the ruling class more than the possibility of a coordinated and unified movement of workers internationally.”

*For more information about Lehman’s protest and the fight to build rank-and-file committees go to: <https://www.willforuawpresident.org> or fill out the form below.*



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