

UAW bureaucracy falsifies the heritage of the Flint sit-down strike to push the bogus run-off

GM Flint Rank and File Committee
16 February 2023

The following statement was issued by the GM Flint Rank-and-File Committee. To contact or join the committee, email gm.flint.rfc@gmail.com

“ALL THE EXPLOITERS OF LABOR HANG TOGETHER. THEY ARE CLASS CONSCIOUS. They are aware of the fact that the interests of their CLASS is involved, and all the patriotic blah blah is for the consumption of fools, and they are hoping we are fools. We as workers must too become aware of CLASS INTEREST. It is only in this way we may get the true picture and understand all the move[s] being made on our political and economic checker board. Under our present economic system, we as workers can only improve our condition by improving the condition of the entire working class.”

—Wyndham Mortimer, autoworker and socialist, in an open letter to Flint workers three months before the sit-down strike, 1936

On the 86th anniversary of the Flint sit-down strike, February 11th, UAW Chairman Eric Welter posted an announcement through Local 598’s phone app to GM Flint Assembly’s workers. Welter urged everyone to vote in the fraudulent run-off election for union president with the claim that this election is what the sit-down strikers fought for. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Implying that the plant’s relatively low number of ballot returns is due to worker apathy, Welter stated, “In celebrating the sit-down strikers today and the legacy of collective bargaining they provided us, I reflect on what their thought would be about participation in the international union election.”

We will tell you what the Flint sit-down strikers would think. First, the UAW presidential run-off election is a fraud. Incumbent UAW president Ray Curry and long-time UAW International Representative

Shawn Fain are facing each other in an election orchestrated by the UAW bureaucracy and the court-appointed UAW Monitor. This election is undemocratic because Curry and Fain were the two “top” vote getters in the first round of voting late last year in an election that intentionally excluded 90 percent of the membership.

The UAW’s intentional suppression of the vote has been conclusively demonstrated by Will Lehman, a rank-and-file worker from Mack Trucks and candidate for UAW president. Lehman submitted a protest to the UAW Monitor on December 19 challenging the 2022 UAW International Officer election results in their entirety. Lehman’s well-documented report established that there was a deliberate suppression of the vote carried out by the entrenched UAW leadership.

In contrast to the first round, we are now barraged with flyers, posters, emails, letters and frequent texts from local union officials using a phone app—none of which was used to inform us of the first round of the election.

Secondly, the UAW bureaucracy represents the opposite of the traditions of the sit-down strike. In fact, the sit-downers would roll over in their graves if they knew that nearly all the achievements won in the 44-day occupation of GM in 1936-37 and afterwards have been given back by the UAW apparatus, from COLA to pensions. And what has been “won” by the bureaucracy in recent decades of sellout contracts? Rapidly falling real wages due to the increasing rate of inflation and a growing army of temp workers who have no rights and no job security but are made to pay union dues.

Long known as “the strike heard around the world,” the Flint sit-down was led by socialists and left-wing militants who understood the **irreconcilable**

conflict between the interests of the working class—whose collective labor produces society’s wealth—and the capitalist owners whose profits are based on the exploitation of our labor.

GM employs workers throughout the world, yet the UAW bureaucracy uses nationalism to pit us against our class brothers and sisters in a race to the bottom. The aim is to divide us and increase GM’s profits. But, as workers, we all face common conditions no matter what our language, country or skin color—job insecurity, inflation, unsafe conditions, and the ever-present danger of nuclear world war.

We have been largely cut off from the history of the sit-down strike due to the decades-long efforts by the UAW bureaucracy to eradicate any semblance of class consciousness, let alone socialist opposition to capitalism. UAW officials endlessly promote a labor-management “partnership” that amounts to complete subservience to the profit demands of the company. The UAW denies that the working class has any interests apart from and antagonistic to the capitalists. This denial goes hand-in-hand with the UAW’s support for the pro-capitalist Democratic Party, including support for the Biden administration’s anti-strike legislation against the railroad workers.

It is a further insult to the heritage of the sit-downers that the names of former UAW Presidents Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, along with former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell—all three convicted of crimes—are inscribed on a UAW memorial in Flint, which is surrounded by the names of the actual noble and courageous sit-downers.

The criminality among the top echelons of the UAW included bribe-taking in exchange for company-friendly agreements, embezzlement of union dues and kickback schemes with vendors.

These illicit funds were used to pay for lavish lifestyles for UAW executives, such as months-long getaways at Palm Springs, endless golf outings, luxury goods and high-priced meals. While the incomes of UAW officials swelled through both illegal and “legal” means over the last 40 years, workers’ jobs and livelihoods have been decimated in one sellout contract after another.

Kenny Malone, one of the original sit-down strikers, told the *Bulletin*, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, in 1986, “What we did was the seizure of

private property, the cardinal sin of society. Roosevelt saw the danger of losing capitalism and like any skilled driver, he threw out a bone. He saved capitalism. I don’t believe he was pro-labor. You can go back as far as you want, the Democrats and Republicans have always been a tool of the ruling class.”

In contrast to Malone and his criticism of both big business parties, the UAW spent \$3,803,938 of our dues money to promote Democratic politicians in the midterm elections.

In August, Will Lehman and his supporters campaigned at the GM Flint plant. In a video on the site of the sit-down strike, Lehman explained, “When I talk to workers, I am often asked why I am a socialist. What many workers don’t know is that socialists led the fight that established the UAW. Here in Flint, militant workers inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution seized GM’s plant.

“The downfall of the UAW began with Reuther’s purge of socialists and left-wing militants in the 1940s and 1950s. This is the origin of the pro-capitalist apparatus that has cooperated in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and a return to levels of exploitation in the factories that mirrors the years before the UAW.

“The wreckage caused by the pro-company apparatus can be seen in Flint. In 1960, Flint had the highest per capita income in the US. Today, after decades of plant closings, layoffs, wage cutting and betrayed strikes, it is one of the poorest cities in the country.”

We urge workers to continue the fight of Will Lehman by joining the RFC to organize a new movement of rank-and-file workers to abolish the UAW apparatus and carry out a real struggle against exploitation, inequality and war as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

To contact or join the committee, email gm.flint.rfc@gmail.com



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)