

Autoworkers resolve to establish network of rank-and-file committees at powerful IWA-RFC meeting in Detroit Sunday

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On Sunday, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) took a significant step forward, holding a meeting attended in Detroit and online by several dozen worker delegates from rank-and-file committees in the auto and heavy equipment industries, as well as teachers and other sections of the working class.

Delegates from General Motors, Stellantis (formerly Fiat-Chrysler), auto parts makers Dana and Forvia (formerly Faurecia), Mack Trucks, and construction and mining equipment maker Caterpillar resolved at the meeting to affiliate with the IWA-RFC, and to establish a steering committee to guide the development of a network of autoworkers rank-and-file committees in the US.

The meeting was addressed by Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist from Pennsylvania, who has been running for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) as a supporter of the IWA-RFC.

In powerful and frequently moving contributions during the meeting, workers described harrowing conditions at their workplaces, recounted the deadly and ongoing impact of COVID-19, denounced the indifference and complicity of the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy, and spoke passionately in support of the construction of a worldwide movement of the working class.

The meeting was held as major class battles are exploding internationally, including demonstrations in France by millions of workers against President Emmanuel Macron's dictatorial imposition of pension cuts over the past week; a strike by hundreds of thousands of transportation workers in Germany against the rising cost of living Monday; and mass protests in Israel against the far-right Netanyahu government on Sunday.

Marcus Day, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, opened the meeting, noting that the event coincided with the swearing in of Shawn Fain as UAW president. Day explained: "The fact is that this administration lacks any shred of legitimacy or authority. They are coming into office as the result of a so-called union election in which the most basic democratic rights of workers were flouted by both the bureaucracy and the UAW Monitor itself, and in which substantial numbers of workers were not even informed of the election or provided a ballot."

"Behind Fain's rhetoric that there is a 'new, fighting UAW,'" Day continued, "the same pro-corporate apparatus remains in place." In a swift vindication of this assessment, on Monday, the UAW Special Bargaining Convention voted overwhelmingly to reject a resolution that would have nominally committed the UAW bargaining team to include COLA (cost-of-living raises) in their own contract proposals with the Big Three.

Day reviewed the broader context in which the meeting was being held, including the staggering cost-of-living crisis facing workers and the efforts of the ruling class, with the support of the union bureaucracies, to

impose the burden of the capitalist economic crisis and war onto the working class.

Day explained that the recent events in France revealed certain fundamental features of class society everywhere, exposing the state once again as a naked instrument of the financial oligarchy.

What is emerging in response, he continued, "is the global class struggle. This meeting here today is itself part of this international process. You are highly conscious representatives of an international working class which is seeking to overcome the obstacles to securing its interests."

Addressing the meeting next, Will Lehman reviewed the experiences which led him to join the movement for rank-and-file committees and subsequently run for UAW president, including the powerful 2021 strike at Volvo Trucks and the formation of a rank-and-file committee by workers there.

Lehman emphatically urged workers to reject the nationalism promoted by the UAW bureaucracy and adopt an internationalist strategy, saying such a perspective is needed

to fight against these transnational corporations that seek to exploit us by dividing us up by country. That's not the goal of the working class. I have no issues with any workers in China, Ukraine, Russia, or anywhere else in the world, and neither do any of the workers that I work with. And that's the whole point of advancing the IWA-RFC, is building those bonds and ties across countries, no matter where you're from; it's not the allegiance to a nation-state, it's the allegiance to ourselves, as class coworkers.

A lively discussion among the delegates followed the opening reports. One of several members of the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee in attendance spoke at length on the wave of victimizations and firings that both the company and the UAW bureaucracy have been carrying out in recent months.

"I will be basically speaking on the behalf of those terminated from the Dana Toledo facility," she said. "Within the last couple of months, there has been a large amount of people that have been terminated over bogus reasons. You're being pushed out the door for something as simple as walking onto the line a minute late, and you're being told to just live with the fact that you were paying union dues, you worked seven days a week, you gave your all to this company, and that's just how it goes.

"Not only is the company pushing all these people out, the UAW is aiding this purge by not helping us get reinstated. They're not answering our grievances. They're not reaching out to us. Our grievances are being

denied at step one.”

To reverse this situation, the Dana Toledo Rank-and-File Committee was working to forge connections with workers at other plants and coordinate their struggles, she said. “We’re basically trying to build alliances with the Jeep workers, General Motors, Caterpillar workers, Syncreon. Because we do play a very vital role inside the automotive industry. We make the axles of a lot of these vehicles and supply a lot of automotive facilities. Now, without these axles these cars cannot be built. It’s just that simple. And with the Big Three contract coming up, this is the perfect time to get workers there to build their own rank-and-file committees, so they can start to have a say on their working conditions.”

A member of the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee spoke next, describing how the UAW bureaucracy had worked to impose the company’s demands for real wage cuts by concealing essential information from workers.

“One, I am 100 percent in solidarity and standing with workers at Dana,” he began. “I totally understand where they’re coming from, what they’re going through.”

Since the contract at Caterpillar supposedly passed, he continued, workers were being fired “for small violations like at Dana, for attendance, or going through and looking at our social media.”

Giving voice to a powerful sentiment among workers for international solidarity, he continued, “I understand that right now, if you look at the situation globally, we are in the midst of a working class revolution, as long as we can get working class people in America to be on the same page with one another, and with our international brothers and sisters.

“Right now, we have a boot on our neck. And it is not going away. We are our only defense against these corporations. Because without us, they cannot profit off of our backs, our work ethics, how good we do our job, and maintaining and keeping their flow going.”

One of the delegates from the GM Flint Rank-and-File Committee then spoke, drawing an important historical contrast between the UAW’s origins and the situation workers confront today.

“We are home to the Flint sit-down strikes, which led to the original UAW being formed, which is not what it was like it was back then,” she said. “We were once the most successful city in the country with the highest standard of living, and now we are poverty-stricken with unemployment. Workers have to have two jobs to get by. They put a plasma center across from the plant in case you want to make extra money by donating your plasma.

“We also had to go through the Flint water crisis, which caused a lot of cognitive problems and physical problems to people, and their pets died. And they didn’t switch the water over in the plants until the metal started corroding away. And then, after that happened, we finally got like filtered water to drink in our plant.”

Workers confront many safety issues and speed-up in the plant, she said. “We’re basically running in place. They keep adding and adding stuff to our jobs and cutting other jobs. I have to be in five places at one time, and it’s not doable. And then we talk to the UAW, and they tell you what you want to hear. And then they disappear for like a month and you don’t see them again.

“Sometimes the plant floods with water, it’s on like a floodplain. And we have to use electric tools too and keep doing our jobs, and they don’t let us stop. There’s been a lot of serious injuries in the plant. Some of the equipment falls from the ceiling.”

Another member of the GM Flint Rank-and-File Committee appealed for workers to unite to overturn the tiered system, saying, “I think it’s important that we link the issues of temp workers to seniority workers, and explain that we face common issues despite the discrepancies in pay and other benefits or lack thereof, to come together as a whole workforce and fight both the union bureaucracy and the company.”

A delegate from the GM Lansing Workers Rank-and-File Committee

explained how workers were just recently confronted with major safety hazards in the plant. “There was just a fire in the body shop on Friday. And everybody over there was complaining about how bad the air was, how it was hurting their throats, people were having asthma issues, because there was still smoke. Everything still smelled terrible, because they didn’t air the building out enough before they sent everybody back in there.

“And they’ve been doing a lot of construction right behind the door line. And at one point, they were welding and grinding on metal, and people couldn’t see the person six feet away from them, a lot of them went to medical because people are throwing up, their eyes are burning, their throats hurt.”

The worker said she agreed with the comments of her sister at GM Flint about the UAW bureaucracy. “The way that the UAW handles everything, it doesn’t matter what you complain about, like she said, they tell you what you want to hear, but then they don’t actually do anything to fix the problem. They are, as far as I’m concerned, in the company’s pocket, they back the company, they do as little as they can for us to help the company out.

“I’m just at my wit’s end with it. I’m done with it. Something’s got to change. And if we can all get together and all be on the same page, I feel like we could all help each other out in a major way.”

Despite the efforts of the corporations, the media, and the political establishment to present the COVID-19 pandemic as over and a distant memory for the population, many of the delegates reported their traumatic experiences unnecessarily losing family members and friends to the disease, because of the ruling class’s prioritization of profits over saving lives.

An auto parts worker from Michigan described losing his brother, who worked with him at the same factory. “He was also going through some underlying health issues like diabetes when COVID hit our plant. He was terrified at the time. He knew if he caught COVID-19, there was a big possibility that he would not make it. Well, we were forced to continue working. And he did actually contract COVID through work. He died a slow and horrible death right beside me and my fiancée’s side.”

A worker at the Stellantis Warren Truck Plant from Michigan, speaking with fierce emotion, said later: “The whole premise of the union was to make sure that we had a good work environment, and we do not. We’re paying them every month. And we’re basically flushing money down the toilet. I can agree with many people in this room about our representation.

“And it’s sickening, just listening to everybody, I’m really trying to fight back tears, because we sacrifice so much on a daily basis just to get up and make a living for ourselves and our families. And this is what we’re left with, at the end of the day, you know, we’re broke down.

“My plant was hit pretty hard with COVID. Most of the people that I worked with are no longer with us... I want to say, within the first two months of COVID here we had eight people die.”

Workers from beyond the auto industry also spoke of COVID’s toll. An educator from Alabama told the meeting, “When we helped ourselves, with everybody taking a sick day, we were chastised by the union.

“We fought and they still required people to come to work. People used up their leave until we couldn’t use it up anymore. So then two more teachers died. Then we lost four more teachers and waited and waited until the eighth teacher died.”

Evan Blake, the coordinator for the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, reported on the WSWS’s investigation to uncover the real impact of the pandemic on the working class, and the class interests behind the disaster which had unfolded over the past three years.

“COVID-19 has now killed over 20 million people throughout the world,” Blake stated. “It’s disabled tens of millions more with Long COVID. And it’s basically brought about the collapse of the health care industry. For the first time since World War Two, life expectancy declined

globally. And now we're at the beginning of the fourth year of the pandemic, and there's just a massive propaganda campaign to claim that it's over."

Contrary to the claims of the ruling class, COVID can in fact be eliminated, Blake explained, "but this requires an international, comprehensive response from the working class."

Towards the conclusion of the meeting, Eric London, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, gave a detailed report on the antidemocratic character of the UAW elections, which in its first round saw a historically low 9 percent turnout for a national union election.

London reviewed new information that had come to light about the corporate ties and blatant conflict of interest of the law firms comprising the UAW Monitor, which recently rejected Will Lehman's protest over widespread disenfranchisement in the UAW elections.

The law firms behind the Monitor, London explained, had regularly served as legal representation for the Big Three auto companies, Caterpillar and other corporations, even as they were nominally tasked with "independently" overseeing the UAW apparatus.

"The two law firms that make up the monitor are two of the most powerful corporate law firms in the country," London said. "These are the people who the UAW recommended to be Monitor."

Summing up, London said he agreed with "the people who have spoken today on the need for education, on the need for a focus on history, on the need to bring in the whole lessons of the class struggle. Nothing is going to happen except through the organization of a rank-and-file movement, which is capable of tearing power out of their hands, and putting it back on the shop floor. And that's what Will Lehman's campaign was about."

At the end of the meeting, a resolution was put to the floor and unanimously adopted to found a steering committee for a network of autoworkers rank-and-file committees, in order to fight for what workers need. Recognizing that the fight of autoworkers in the US was part of a developing global movement of the working class, delegates resolved to support the IWA-RFC.

"The real struggle for democracy in the union lies ahead," the resolution stated. "The reshuffling of positions among bureaucrats in Solidarity House changes nothing. The UAW's collaboration with the government and corporations, the betrayal of workers' interests, and the suppression of their democratic rights will not be changed by the replacement of Curry by Fain. What is required is the transfer of power to the rank and file and the elimination of the entire UAW apparatus."



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