

# Freight industry publication discusses “surprise” Mack Trucks strike, “socialist fervor” among autoworkers

Joseph Kishore  
11 October 2023

On Sunday, nearly 4,000 workers at Mack Trucks voted overwhelmingly against a United Auto Workers-backed contract, forcing a strike that began on Monday morning. The vote has sent shockwaves through corporate management and has dealt a major blow to UAW President Shawn Fain’s phony “stand-up” strike.

This nervousness and alarm was expressed by the industry publication *FreightWaves*, which published an article Monday under the headline, “How Socialist agitating helped tank Mack-UAW deal,” by Alan Adler, a former Associated Press and *Detroit Free Press* reporter who worked in GM’s communications department for two decades.

Five days earlier, Adler participated in a discussion with *FreightWaves* in which he asserted that “Mack workers were pretty satisfied” with the deal. One of the commentators added, “Looks like everybody seems to be walking away with what they wanted, [though] of course ratification will make that all secure in the end.”

All did not turn out to be “secure in the end,” and less than a week later *FreightWaves* turned to a discussion of why they got it so wrong.

In their commentary after the strike, Adler and *FreightWaves* discuss their “surprise” that a tentative agreement that “looked pretty good” was voted down by a “huge” margin of 73 percent. In the process, they only expose how distant they and the media as a whole are from the thinking and experiences of workers.

They cite, as an example, the 19 percent pay increase over five years. The last contract, rammed through by the UAW in 2019, included a wage increase of only 6 percent over four years, as well as increased healthcare costs. Not only does the new agreement fail to make up

for the 20 percent decline in real wages under the last contract, but it would institute below-inflation increases for the next five years, with no Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA).

Among the other “good things” in the contract cited by *FreightWaves* is an addition of 30 minutes to the workday, at straight time pay. The commentators expressed surprise that workers would not welcome this change, since they could make more money by working longer hours. Have they not heard of the 8-hour day? Workers in the United States engaged in bitter struggle to win the right not to spend their entire lives at work.

Adler proposed two explanations for why the vote did not go as they expected, summed up in the underline of his article: “One is the so-called rank-and-file committees, workers who claim socialism as their mantra. Through the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS), they regularly attack union leaders at the local and international levels. They call them toadies for management who bring secretly negotiated, substandard contracts to members incentivized with a signing bonus.”

The other, he writes, is “the ongoing UAW strike at the Detroit Three automakers.”

In his article, Adler begins with the UAW strike. According to Adler’s presentation, UAW President Shawn Fain is taking a hard line in negotiations with GM, Ford and Stellantis, including on COLA and an end to tiers. “For the first time,” Adler writes, “the UAW simultaneously targeted all three companies—General Motors, Ford and Stellantis.”

This turns reality on its head. The UAW apparatus under Fain supported the Mack Trucks agreement, which Fain referred to as a “record contract.” At the

Big Three, the UAW is carrying out a phony “stand-up” strike, specifically designed to have as little an impact as possible. Nearly four weeks after the expiration of the contract, 83 percent of workers remain on the job, while those not subject to striking have been subject to layoffs and victimization. The strike at Mack is not in line with the UAW’s strategy at the Big Three but a direct repudiation of it.

The second, and more important, reason cited by Adler is a recognition within the corporate media of the radicalization of workers, which coincides with the development of rank-and-file committees and the growth of socialist consciousness.

Adler writes of what he calls “The Lehman Factor,” that is, the influence of Mack worker Will Lehman, who ran for president against Shawn Fain and other UAW bureaucrats on the basis of a socialist program and the call for the transfer of power to the rank and file. He cites the comments of Lehman at a meeting of Mack Trucks workers prior to the vote, when Lehman told workers, “This is the kind of contract that gets negotiated behind closed doors.”

*FreightWaves*’ discussion of the “Lehman Factor” is a worried recognition from the industry publication that the opposition of workers is breaking free from the control of the union apparatus. “This idea of following what your leaders say is getting to be less and less common in union negotiations,” Adler notes.

In recent years, UAW workers have rejected UAW-backed contracts overwhelmingly and repeatedly. The rebellion of workers against the apparatus is now beginning to take organizational form, through the establishment of a network of rank-and-file committees, including the Mack Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

Beyond a growing militancy, which is bad enough, even more worrying for *FreightWaves* is the politicization of workers. There is a “pretty good socialist fervor inside this negotiation right now,” Adler comments.

Lehman received 5,000 votes in elections for UAW president that were characterized by a systematic campaign of voter suppression by the apparatus. Turnout was less than 9 percent, with the vast majority of workers not even knowing that an election was taking place.

Under these conditions, the 5,000 votes for Lehman

express a very significant political shift taking place in the working class as a whole. Lehman called for the abolition of the apparatus and the transfer of power to the rank and file. Moreover, he ran as a socialist and advocate for the international unity of the working class.

The decades-long campaign to exclude socialist ideas from the working-class movement, in which the trade union apparatus has played a central role, is breaking apart. Workers are increasingly expressing opposition, not just to one or another workplace issue, but the entire social structure. The enormous inequality, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few executives, the immense levels of profit accumulated by the companies under conditions of extreme exploitation of workers—it is because of this that the socialist positions of Lehman are finding support.

The growing influence of socialist ideas among workers in the United States has colossal national and international significance. The developments at Mack make clear that the perspective of the socialist movement, expressed in the *World Socialist Web Site*, is intersecting with a powerful objective movement of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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