

The fight against war is a fight against the union bureaucracies

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The following speech was given by Will Lehman, an autoworker at Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania and member of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, at the International May Day 2024 Online Rally, held Saturday, May 4.

On behalf of American autoworkers and the American working class, I want to extend revolutionary greetings to the brothers and sisters attending this May Day rally all over the world. This holiday is about us, the international working class. Labor knows no borders.

Last year, many North American autoworkers went through an important fight over the exploitative conditions that we confront in the factories. In plant after plant, workers had ratified strike authorization votes by 90 percent or more, demonstrating an immense desire to fight. Where the fight went wrong was where it began — in the hands of the UAW bureaucracy. The first action the UAW bureaucrats took was to weaken any strike action as much as possible. The “stand up” strike was devised as a way of dividing us up and limiting any negative effect to automaker profits as much as possible.

Workers need to study the international and historical experience of the workers’ movement. As a class, we will not find a substitute for serious study of the past. And we can also learn from recent history. Last year our fight was betrayed and dead-ended by the UAW bureaucracy. It is of immense importance that we analyze the struggle that we went through and draw the necessary political conclusions from it, so we do not suffer the same losses again.

What workers need to understand—one of the most important lessons from these past sellouts—is that they are not the results of individual union leaders. The pseudo-left tried to make American autoworkers

believe that Shawn Fain was some sort of union militant who would reform the union. But as soon as he got installed in office in a bogus election, Fain arranged the sellout that is already causing layoffs and plant closures. The same thing happened in the Teamsters, where drivers were told that Sean O’Brien was a union reformer. Then he too forced a sellout contract on the workers. Fain and O’Brien are now busy making the rounds with Biden and Trump.

The lesson is that the unions can’t be made to represent workers by changing the figures at the top. The bureaucracy represents its own, separate interests from rank-and-file workers. It is committed to the profits and wealth of the corporations that it actually represents. Because the bureaucracy is committed to defending the profits of the corporations, it is committed to the increased exploitation of autoworkers. When that does not satisfy the corporate profit drive, the unions are ready to support layoffs and plant closures.

Like they are committed to the profits of “their corporations,” the union bureaucracies are committed to “their own” capitalist countries. That is why everywhere they are rallying to the cause of war, like Shawn Fain is in the US with his talk of making American factories an “arsenal of democracy.”

What we as workers need to connect as a class is that the fight against exploitation is the same fight as the fight against war. The connection becomes easier to make when we pose the questions: Whose class interests does the war serve? And whose class interests does the exploitation of workers as a class serve?

The answer is the class that owns the plants and other means of production, the class that gets rich off of our sweat—the capitalist class. That is the same American capitalist class that is handing over the weapons to

destroy Gaza and that is trying to launch a world war against Russia and China. Workers have to understand that in any major war we will be the ones asked to sacrifice—and not only our wages, but our lives.

The fight against exploitation in the factories and imperialist war abroad cannot be won by relying on the trade union bureaucracies and the two capitalist political parties. The lessons of both recent struggles and those of the past cannot be forgiven and forgotten, they must be thoroughly learned. And once learned, it is our responsibility to share those lessons with our co-workers.

As we meet today, the Biden administration and both parties of the American ruling class are carrying out an unprecedented and dictatorial police assault on students protesting against the Gaza genocide on college campuses across the US. Over 1,000 youth and students have been arrested. Similar crackdowns are taking place in Germany, Australia and internationally. As workers, we must rally to the defense of students. They need our support, and their fight is our fight.

Brothers and sisters, we, the workers of the world, have the power in our hands to put an end to imperialist war once and for all. It is we who produce all the wealth of society. It is we who run the factories, the plants, logistics and transportation.

But we workers have to learn the lessons of history. And we have to recognize our own class interests, and how to understand who is lying to us and who is telling us the truth. The *World Socialist Web Site* and International Committee of the Fourth International always tell workers the truth.

Again, Happy May Day to my brothers and sisters the world over!

Stop imperialist war, fascism and dictatorship!

End the exploitation of the working class!

Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees!

Join the ICFI and take up the fight for socialism!



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