

UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman calls for solidarity with Turkish miners' wildcat strike

Our reporters
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Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker in Pennsylvania and a candidate for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), has issued a statement of solidarity with 1,243 coal miners who have launched a wildcat strike at Polyak Mining in İzmir, Turkey.

The miners, members of the Independent Mining Workers union—Bağcımaden İş—have halted production to demand payment of unpaid wages, enforcement of promotion rights, retroactive contract benefits, guaranteed seniority and severance protections, and genuine health and safety measures. Their action follows a growing wave of militant struggles in Turkey carried out independently of the established union apparatus.

“I send my warmest greetings and full solidarity to the 1,243 coal miners at Polyak Mining in the Kütahya district of İzmir who have taken the courageous step of halting production in a wildcat strike,” Lehman wrote. He described the walkout as “a powerful expression of working-class strength,” stressing that by acting independently, the miners are defending not only themselves but “the rights of workers everywhere.”

The strike has erupted under conditions in which miners continue to face dangerous working environments and systematic violations of contractual rights. Lehman emphasized that miners “know better than anyone that safety cannot be separated from wages and working conditions,” pointing to the global pattern in which mining corporations reap immense profits while cutting corners on safety and delaying or denying basic rights.

The Polyak strike takes place only a short distance from the Eynez coal mine in the Soma district, site of the May 13, 2014 methane explosion that killed 301

miners in what remains the worst industrial disaster in Turkey's history. The tragedy at Eynez became a turning point in Turkish working-class consciousness.

At the time, tens of thousands of workers took to the streets demanding justice, only to face police repression. The disaster exposed the consequences of privatization, deregulation and the subordination of safety to profit under the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The events in Soma triggered widespread anger not only against the mining companies but also against pro-corporate union officials who were widely seen as puppets of the corporations and complicit in maintaining unsafe conditions.

Lehman's statement draws a direct connection between that history and the present struggle. “Even as miners' bodies were being pulled out, police fired tear gas and water cannons on tens of thousands of striking workers demanding justice,” he noted. “The Soma disaster led to a rebellion ... against the pro-corporate unions and the Erdoğan government's program of privatization, austerity and sacrifice of workers' lives for profit.”

The current strike also follows closely on the heels of a wildcat strike by Migros warehouse workers, led by the independent union DGD-Sen. That struggle won significant public support and forced concessions from management, demonstrating the potential power of collective action organized outside the established labor bureaucracy.

“These back-to-back struggles demonstrate that workers do not need to wait for permission from pro-corporate union bureaucracies or government officials to defend their livelihoods,” Lehman stated. “When

workers act collectively and independently, they become a powerful social force.”

Lehman, who works at Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania, is running for UAW president on a program centered on transferring power from the entrenched union apparatus to rank-and-file workers on the shop floor. His campaign calls for the abolition of the UAW’s bureaucratic structure and the establishment of rank-and-file committees to place decision-making in the hands of workers themselves.

In his statement, Lehman underscored the international character of the issues confronting the Polyak miners. “As a Mack Trucks worker in the United States ... I know that the issues you are fighting—unpaid wages, unsafe conditions, attacks on seniority, erosion of benefits—are the same issues facing workers in auto plants, warehouses and factories in the US and internationally.”

He sharply criticized the economic nationalism promoted by the UAW leadership, which has supported the Trump administration’s trade war measures and sought to pit American workers against their counterparts abroad. Such policies, Lehman argued, serve only to divide the working class while multinational corporations continue to operate on a global scale.

“Corporations operate globally. Our response must also be global,” Lehman wrote. “This means building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to coordinate our struggles across national borders.”

The call for international coordination reflects a broader process unfolding worldwide. From miners and warehouse workers in Turkey to autoworkers in North America and Europe, workers are increasingly confronting the same underlying dynamics: corporate restructuring, speedup, erosion of seniority rights, the slashing of benefits and the systematic undermining of safety standards.

The global mining industry, in particular, remains notorious for deadly conditions. Despite technological advances, profit-driven cost-cutting continues to place workers at risk. Disasters such as Soma stand alongside tragedies in China, Russia, South Africa and the Americas as stark reminders of the consequences of subordinating human life to shareholder returns.

Lehman’s statement concludes with an appeal to

workers across sectors and continents: “I call on miners, autoworkers, logistics workers and all sections of the international working class to support the Polyak miners’ strike. No worker should stand alone.”

He stressed that the development of rank-and-file committees—independent of bureaucracies that collaborate with corporations and governments—is essential for unifying struggles across borders. The fight in İzmir, he wrote, is “part of a growing movement of workers worldwide who are saying: enough is enough.”

The solidarity extended by an American autoworker candidate to Turkish coal miners underscores the objective interconnection of workers’ struggles under globalized capitalism. While governments and union bureaucracies promote nationalism and division, the conditions driving workers into struggle—stagnant wages, dangerous workplaces, job insecurity and social inequality—are shared internationally.

For the Polyak miners, the immediate issues are concrete and urgent: unpaid wages, contractual rights and safe working conditions. But their fight resonates far beyond İzmir. As Lehman’s statement makes clear, it forms part of an emerging movement seeking to place control over working conditions and industrial policy in the hands of workers themselves.

“Your fight in İzmir is part of a growing movement of workers worldwide,” Lehman wrote. “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

With these words, Lehman places the Turkish miners’ strike within a broader struggle for international working-class solidarity—one that challenges not only individual employers, but the global system that subordinates human needs to profit.



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