

UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman calls for rank-and-file slate as delegate elections begin

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In an open letter to members of the United Auto Workers (UAW), rank-and-file autoworker Will Lehman has called for the formation of an “insurgent slate” of delegates to the UAW’s Constitutional Convention, scheduled for June 15-18 in Detroit.

Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania, is running for UAW president for the second time. In his letter, he warns that a decisive stage of the election is already underway—in delegate nominations and elections at the local level that most UAW members do not know about.

“Many members may not yet be aware that a new election is taking place this year for UAW president and other national offices,” Lehman wrote. “But it begins now—through delegate nominations and elections in every local. If the rank and file doesn’t organize to win those delegate elections, the bureaucracy will control the Constitutional Convention in June and make sure only those loyal to the apparatus can run for top officer positions.”

The UAW Constitutional Convention will nominate candidates for national office. Without control over that process, Lehman argues, rank-and-file opposition candidates can be blocked, leaving the broader membership without any meaningful opportunity to vote.

“That’s why I’m urging workers to form an insurgent slate of rank-and-file delegates and to demand a real, democratic delegate process in every local,” he states. “The only way ‘one member, one vote,’ will have any meaning is if workers—not the corrupt bureaucracy—can democratically choose who to vote for.”

In November–December 2021, UAW members and

retirees voted by 63.7 percent in a court-ordered referendum to replace the union’s delegate system of choosing national officers with direct elections—widely known as “one member, one vote.” The vote followed a sweeping federal corruption investigation that exposed a network of bribery, embezzlement and labor-management collusion at the highest levels of the union.

Under the old system, delegates—largely loyal to the apparatus—were elected at the local level and then voted for approved candidates at the Constitutional Convention. This tightly controlled mechanism led to the installation of former UAW presidents Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, along with former Vice Presidents Joseph Ashton and Norwood Jewell—all of whom were later convicted on corruption-related charges tied to corporate bribes and the misuse of union dues.

The referendum was widely understood by rank-and-file workers as a mandate to break the grip of this entrenched bureaucracy and establish genuine democratic control.

But the 2022–23 election, the first direct membership vote in UAW history, was marred by what Lehman showed in lawsuits were widespread violations by the UAW apparatus of the right to vote.

“In the last UAW election, there was systematic voter suppression,” Lehman wrote in the letter. “Many members never received ballots, information was withheld, and the process was dominated by an apparatus that does not represent us.”

In lawsuits filed during the election, Lehman documented how large sections of the membership were effectively disenfranchised. The UAW apparatus

failed to adequately inform workers that an election was taking place. Mailing addresses were not updated, leading to a significant number of ballots being returned as undeliverable. Certain categories of workers, including part-time temporary employees, were falsely told they were not eligible to vote.

The result was an election with historically low participation. Only 9 percent of eligible members cast ballots in the first round—one of the lowest turnouts in any major union election in the United States.

Out of this process emerged Shawn Fain, a longtime official in the UAW International and former assistant to Norwood Jewell in the UAW-Chrysler Department—identified by federal prosecutors as the center of a “culture of corruption” within the union.

Lehman argues that Fain’s administration has preserved the fundamental structures of apparatus control.

“Shawn Fain—a long-time functionary in the UAW International—came to power promising ‘change’ and the ‘democratization’ of the UAW,” Lehman wrote. “Instead, he presided over backroom deals with employers, phony ‘stand-up’ strikes that kept workers on the job, continued corruption and ongoing betrayals. In other words, he is just the figurehead leading the same old bureaucracy.”

The current nomination procedures are tightly controlled. Locals hold meetings often with little or no notice to the members, where candidates for delegates are nominated. Then in a matter of weeks, the nominations are closed. With little or no notice to the members, snap elections are held. This structure virtually guarantees that those already integrated into the local apparatus are elected as delegates.

Lehman cites the example of UAW Local 2209 at the GM Fort Wayne Assembly plant in Indiana, where he says nominations began on February 12 and were closed February 17 in a process that few workers knew about. The plant’s roughly 4,000 workers account for nearly 10 percent of the active UAW membership at GM.

“If we leave this election in the hands of the bureaucracy, they will use the same methods as before to block genuine opposition and keep control,” Lehman warned. He called on workers to demand well-publicized meetings, full notice to the membership, clear rules and an end to what he describes as backroom

maneuvers.

“This is a practical and urgent task,” he writes. “If we elect rank-and-file delegates, we can begin transforming the election into a movement of workers ourselves.”

Lehman emphasized that his campaign is not a bid for personal advancement. “This campaign is not about getting me into some cushy office at Solidarity House—I’m not going to be moving there. I will stay on the shop floor,” he wrote, referring to the UAW’s Detroit headquarters.

“The aim of this campaign is not to replace one official with another, but to abolish a pro-corporate bureaucracy that has enforced concessions, isolated workers, and protected its own privileges while conditions in the plants and workplaces get worse.”

The open letter outlines a program centered on reversing decades of concessions and dismantling labor-management collaboration, abolishing tiers, winning major wage increases, ending layoffs and plant closures and establishing workers’ control over safety, staffing and line speed. Lehman also demands secure healthcare for active workers and guaranteed, fully funded retiree benefits, including protection of pensions and cost-of-living increases.

The letter links the struggle within the UAW to broader political questions. “The same corporate-state forces attacking living standards are escalating repression at home and war abroad,” Lehman writes. He calls for mobilizing the “social power of workers—through independent organization and united action—to defend democratic rights, oppose militarism, and put human needs ahead of profit.”

Lehman concludes his letter with a direct appeal to workers to get involved by supporting or running as part of a delegate slate. “The rank and file must take power out of the hands of the entrenched apparatus and put it where it belongs: in the hands of workers on the shop floor,” he wrote.



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