

# American Axle workers speak out against UAW bureaucracy ahead of contract talks

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Workers at American Axle & Manufacturing's (AAM) Three Rivers, Michigan, plant voiced growing opposition to the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy ahead of contract negotiations set to begin this month. Supporters of autoworker Will Lehman distributed dozens of his campaign statements at the plant on Saturday, sparking discussions with workers about the role of the union apparatus and the need for rank-and-file control.

Lehman, who is running for UAW president on a platform calling for the abolition of the bureaucracy and the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor, has attracted significant interest among workers angered by years of concessions. Many workers stopped to discuss the UAW's role in the 2008 American Axle strike, which resulted in the halving of wages, the destruction of jobs and set a precedent for subsequent attacks on autoworkers across the industry.

Despite mounting opposition, the UAW bureaucracy has advanced only vague demands in the lead-up to negotiations, centered on limited wage increases and "affordable" healthcare, signaling preparations for further concessions. American Axle, like other major auto parts suppliers, plays a critical role in the just-in-time production system feeding assembly plants, particularly General Motors (GM). During the 2019 GM strike, the UAW worked to isolate parts workers and sanctioned the elimination of roughly 2,000 jobs through buyouts rather than mobilizing a broader struggle.

Workers at the plant are demanding substantial wage increases to recover losses imposed during the 2008 concessions and eroded by inflation, as well as job security, oversight of line speed and the restoration of retiree benefits and pensions. There is also deep opposition to the diversion of funds into the UAW-controlled Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Association (VEBA), which workers widely view as a mechanism used to offload corporate obligations while enriching the union apparatus.

The developing opposition at American Axle is part of a broader situation confronting thousands of auto parts workers across the industry. Workers at Nexteer, Bridgewater Interiors and Magna Seating all face contract deadlines in the coming period, each occupying critical positions within the just-in-time production system that feeds the major assembly plants. Any unified struggle by parts workers would have an immediate impact on production throughout the auto industry.

At the same time, workers in other sectors—including meatpacking workers at JBS and healthcare workers at Genesys

and Corewell Health—are entering into struggles of their own, confronting the same issues of falling real wages, speedup and the subordination of working conditions to corporate profit. The convergence of these struggles underscores the potential for a broader movement of the working class, cutting across industries and national borders.

In his campaign statement, Lehman has called for a break with pro-corporate policies and a turn toward class struggle, insisting that workers must recover all losses imposed through decades of concessions and inflation and secure the economic rights of retirees.

Workers at American Axle expressed strong agreement with this perspective and deep hostility to the union apparatus.

"Get rid of the bureaucracy," a night shift worker said in response to Lehman's campaign. "You mean the people that steal money out of our strike fund and don't get punished for it? They spend a ton up at Solidarity House. They embezzle money from the strike fund and still get paid more than we do. How is that fair?"

The bitterness expressed by workers is rooted in the outcome of the 2008 American Axle strike, which lasted 87 days and ended in a devastating concessions agreement imposed by the UAW. Roughly half of the company's 3,700 workers in Michigan and New York lost their jobs, while wages were slashed from \$27–\$28 an hour to as low as \$10. The agreement established a new benchmark for wage-cutting and restructuring across the auto industry.

Nearly two decades later, the consequences remain. Many workers report that they are still struggling to recover from the losses imposed during that period, with current wages failing to keep pace with inflation and rising living costs.

As new contract negotiations begin this month, the UAW has attempted to posture as an opponent of these past concessions. In a recent video, the union referenced the 2008 strike, including images of workers sleeping in their cars, while promoting its conduct during the 2023 "Stand Up" strike against the Big Three.

Workers, however, responded with anger, pointing to the central role played by the UAW bureaucracy in enforcing the very concessions it now claims to oppose.

“You undercut us when we were on strike in ’08—it cost a lot of us our jobs,” one worker wrote on social media. “We walked the line in solidarity.”

Another worker rejected the entire framework of concessions, stating, “They should have let the companies collapse. Don’t accept less than what was taken from us.”

Workers described the long-term impact of concessions on their living standards, emphasizing that wages remain far below what is needed to sustain a decent standard of living.

“I started here at \$10 an hour,” a worker with more than a decade at the plant said. “I had to work over 70 hours a week just to get by, and I was still on food stamps. That’s what the UAW brought us.”

Now earning roughly \$22 an hour, the worker said conditions have improved little. “We have no faith in our local. We have to fight our own battles. When we hired in, senior workers told us the UAW pressured people into voting for the contract to keep their jobs. That came from the International.”

Workers also pointed to the coercive conditions under which the 2008 agreement was ratified. After being isolated on the picket line for nearly three months and receiving only \$200 a week in strike pay, many felt they had no real choice but to accept the deal. At the same time, American Axle CEO Richard Dauch boasted that the company had cut labor costs by roughly 50 percent, saving hundreds of millions of dollars.

Like the earlier restructuring at Delphi and other auto parts suppliers, workers said the concessions at American Axle became a model for the broader restructuring of the auto industry, including the spread of tiered wages and the erosion of basic safety protections.

Workers described increasingly grueling conditions on the shop floor, driven by speedup and the erosion of any meaningful union oversight.

“They want you to run nonstop,” one worker said. “They shorten the cycle times and expect you to rush through every job. Where’s the compensation for the wear and tear on your body? Where’s the compensation for the risk of injury? You’re moving faster, lifting more, and they act like it’s normal.”

Workers reported routinely lifting between 45 and 70 pounds, often while dealing with preexisting injuries. “Some of us have back problems or slipped discs, and we’re not even supposed to be walking like this,” another worker explained. “But nothing changes.”

They added that the union no longer monitors line speed or enforces basic protections. “We used to not make changes unless the union was there watching cycle times. Now we don’t even make committeeman calls—Nothing happens if you do. Management just says they can do whatever they want.”

Workers also described a workplace culture shaped by favoritism and retaliation. “Some people get special treatment if they suck up to management,” one worker said. “It turns everyone against each other instead of standing together.”

Recent events have further underscored workers’ concerns about safety and working conditions. Following a tornado in the area, workers reported that those sheltering inside the plant were packed

into unsafe conditions. “They had us in a shelter with windows, packed in like sardines,” one worker said.

At the same time, workers said management has been accelerating production and stockpiling parts in anticipation of a potential strike. “When we came back from layoff, we weren’t building for demand—We were filling warehouses,” a worker explained. “They’re preparing for a strike, and they’re pushing us harder because of it.”

A veteran worker drew parallels between the UAW apparatus and the broader political system, arguing that both function to exclude the majority of workers from real decision-making.

“It’s not a real democracy,” he said. “A minority stays in power and doesn’t represent the majority—like the Senate. I was making \$28 an hour before 2008. After the strike, I dropped to \$17.50. Now I’m at \$25. They want us to line up behind them, but they represent the company’s interests, not ours.”

The worker also pointed to efforts by UAW officials to posture as allies of workers while preparing new concessions. “Fain is coming here March 29, putting on a big show with politicians. It’s all about votes.”

Another worker described the political dead end workers face within the framework promoted by both the union apparatus and the two-party system.

“I’m not for either Republicans or Democrats,” he said. “The union pushes everything into that same circle. It just becomes a choice between two bad options.”

In his campaign statement, Lehman warned that workers are entering a new period of intensified attacks, driven by automation, speedup and layoffs, and that these conditions require a break with the policies that have dominated the union for decades.

For workers at American Axle, the issues raised in the campaign are not abstract. Their experiences—of wage cuts, speedup, unsafe conditions and the suppression of opposition—reflect a broader reality confronting workers throughout the auto industry and beyond.

The growing opposition at the plant points to the necessity for workers to organize independently of the union apparatus, developing rank-and-file committees to transfer decision-making power to the shop floor and link their struggle with workers across the United States and internationally.



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