

UAW acting as “management’s enforcer” at Columbia University, says UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman

Our reporters
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Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker from Macungie, Pennsylvania and candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, has issued a statement denouncing the UAW bureaucracy’s intervention against graduate and undergraduate student workers at Columbia University, calling the apparatus “complicit” in political repression at the campus and urging that rank-and-file workers take control of their own struggle.

The statement comes after student workers at Columbia, organized under the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC), voted by 91.5 percent—1,129 to 105—to authorize a strike in pursuit of their second contract with the university. Their first contract expired in July 2025. The overwhelming vote authorized a number of demands. In addition to a living wage with a cost-of-living escalator, stronger protections for non-citizen workers, and expanded healthcare and childcare benefits, the workers raised demands tied to democratic rights on campus, including an end to police collaboration and surveillance, and the right to protest without fear of arrest or deportation.

Rather than honoring that mandate, the UAW apparatus moved quickly to block it. According to SWC communications published on X, Region 9A Servicing Representative Courtney Bither—who earned \$133,000 in 2024—told the local that a strike authorization was unlikely unless demands related to democratic rights were substantially narrowed.

UAW Region 9A—which is lead by Director Brandon Mancilla, a prominent member of the Democratic Socialists of America—threatened to place the SWC under receivership if members refused to water down their proposals. SWC President Grant Miner subsequently emailed members confirming that the

regional leadership had made clear: change the demands or there will be no strike. Under that pressure, the SWC dropped several demands, including those calling for an end to all campus surveillance and the removal of police from campus.

“The UAW apparatus has again exposed whose side it is on—and it is not ours,” Lehman wrote in a statement published on his website. He described the bureaucracy’s move to block the strike as “the machinery of the union acting as management’s enforcer,” and argued that the demands being suppressed are anything but extravagant.

“These are minimal requirements for decent work and basic rights,” he wrote. “The UAW officialdom decided they were ‘too political,’ insisting that the SWC strip out any mention of police repression, academic freedom, or solidarity with international students.”

Lehman was direct about what he sees as the bureaucracy’s material interest in suppressing the strike. “The UAW apparatus sees Columbia’s graduate workers not as workers in struggle but as a lucrative dues stream,” he wrote, noting that tens of thousands of academic workers have been folded into the union in recent years, generating millions in monthly dues for what he called “a bureaucratic caste whose interests are the opposite of the membership’s.”

The Columbia situation, Lehman argued, is an expression of a structural conflict running throughout the UAW. “This confrontation at Columbia expresses the same fundamental conflict between the rank and file and the UAW bureaucracy that has played out across the auto industry, at the Big Three, and at every campus where student workers have organized,” he stated.

“The UAW bureaucracy is complicit,” Lehman wrote, adding, “The bureaucracy cannot be pressured into defending you; it must be opposed and replaced by the organized power of the rank and file.”

Lehman announced his 2026 UAW presidential campaign in February on a platform calling not for reform of the union's leadership but abolition of its bureaucratic hierarchy and full transfer of decision-making authority to rank-and-file workers. His platform includes full wage recovery, a zero-layoff policy, employer-paid healthcare, and a 30-hour workweek with no loss of pay.

In 2022, running in the UAW's first direct presidential election in over 70 years, Lehman won nearly 5,000 votes despite systematic voter suppression in an election in which just 9 percent of eligible members cast ballots.

In the Columbia statement, Lehman called on autoworkers across the country to actively defend the graduate local, warning that a successful bureaucratic rollback there sets a precedent. “If the apparatus succeeds at Columbia, it will use the same methods against you,” he wrote. He called on graduate and undergraduate workers to form independent rank-and-file committees and connect with workers across sectors.

“Your 91.5 percent strike vote speaks to enormous courage and clarity of purpose,” Lehman wrote. “The challenge is to ensure it is not buried by the apparatus but carried forward by the workers themselves.”



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