

Will Lehman's nomination for UAW president: A milestone in the fight for rank-and-file power

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On Wednesday, Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman was nominated as a candidate for president of the United Auto Workers at the union's 39th Constitutional Convention in Detroit. The nomination of a socialist worker, running on a program to abolish the UAW bureaucracy and transfer power to the rank and file, is a major development with national and global significance.

The nomination by the maximum number of two delegates at the convention was the product of a sustained campaign to mobilize autoworkers behind this program. In the weeks leading up to the convention, Lehman appealed directly to workers and delegates to place his name in nomination. Supporters—including UAW members from Nexteer, Dana, Stellantis and Ford—campaigning for Lehman at the convention.

Workers backed his campaign because it expressed their own experiences with the UAW apparatus: sellout contracts, suppression of opposition, the defense of corporate profit and the subordination of workers' struggles to the Democratic Party and the state.

Lehman's nomination is the most conscious expression of a growing rebellion. Nexteer workers in Saginaw have rejected three UAW-backed agreements and authorized strike action by 86 percent. American Axle workers in Three Rivers walked out for the first time since 2008. Dana workers have resisted the same attempt to impose concessions behind their backs. Workers at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis are fighting massive layoffs and plant closures, carried out with the collaboration of the UAW bureaucracy.

This is the second time Lehman has run for UAW president. The 2022 election exposed the UAW's so-called democratic reforms as a fraud. Barely 10 percent of the membership voted. The bureaucracy did everything it could to prevent workers from learning about the election, receiving ballots and participating in the first-ever direct vote for international officers.

The apparatus will behave no differently this time. The bureaucracy will use every means at its disposal to isolate Lehman's campaign, suppress discussion among the membership and present the election as a contest between rival factions of the apparatus.

Lehman's campaign deserves maximum support from workers between now and when the election ends in October. Lehman, an active factory worker, has no apparatus or powerful political connections to draw on. Instead, his campaign will become known only through a growing network of militant workers who support it.

The significance of Lehman's nomination lies above all in the program on which he is running. He is doing what the Democratic Socialists of America, *Jacobin*, Labor Notes and the whole orbit of middle-class "left" defenders of the union apparatus insist is impossible. He is running openly as a socialist, calling for the abolition of the bureaucracy, denouncing the subordination of the unions to the Democratic Party and advancing the international unity of the working class against imperialist war.

As Lehman explained after his nomination: "This campaign is directed against that apparatus. It is about the fight to transfer power from the bureaucracy that has dominated this union to the rank and file—to the workers on the shop floor."

That such a campaign was placed on the ballot at a convention dominated by the bureaucracy is a significant blow to the apparatus. The convention was, for the most part, an assembly of full-time officials, staffers and paid functionaries—an apparatus that functions not as an instrument of workers' struggle, but as an industrial police force enforcing the demands of the corporations.

There was, however, a section of delegates, often those attending their first convention, who responded to Lehman's campaign and expressed disgust at the whole way in which the convention was organized.

Inside the convention, the bureaucracy approved salary

increases for top officers, including an additional \$30,000 for incumbent president Shawn Fain. This was objectively a vote to increase the bureaucracy's share of the exploitation of the working class, who are struggling to survive as a consequence of decades of betrayals. The convention raised from \$850 million to \$1.3 billion the threshold for the strike fund at which dues are automatically reduced, keeping dues at the higher level while voting down substantial increases to strike pay and granting workers only a token increase in weekly strike support.

When resolutions from local unions won enough support to reach the floor, the apparatus pushed through a motion to suspend the rules and prevent further consideration of motions it had not approved. The convention rejected a resolution calling for the abolition of the ICE immigration police, while passing a toothless resolution divesting the union of \$400,000 of investments in Israel.

The bureaucracy then turned the rostrum over to the Democratic Party, widely hated by workers as an instrument of Wall Street and war. AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler called for the mobilization of tens of thousands of UAW campaign workers to elect Democrats in November. Congresswoman Debbie Dingell was given the platform after leading a campaign in Congress for anti-China trade war measures. Abdul El-Sayed, promoted as the UAW's "left" Democratic candidate, delivered the same essential message in the language of economic nationalism.

Fain won election in 2022 with the support of the Democratic Socialists of America, *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin* magazine. These tendencies, drawn from privileged layers of the middle class, are an integral part of the Democratic Party and trade union apparatus. Many individuals from the DSA were handed top positions under Fain's administration, where they became jointly responsible for enforcing thousands of job losses, unsafe working conditions and support for "America First" nationalism and restructuring US industry for war.

Any organization claiming to be socialist withholding support for Lehman's campaign exposes itself completely. Their hostility is so intense they can barely acknowledge the campaign exists. *Labor Notes*, now a de-facto magazine of the UAW bureaucracy, presented the event as a democratic endorsement of Fain while mentioning Lehman only once, buried among a "handful of lesser-known candidates."

The WSWS has endorsed Lehman's campaign because it is a critical mechanism for developing a rank-and-file rebellion against the apparatus. The pseudo-left organizations in and around the Democratic Party denounce the WSWS as "sectarian." By this they mean its refusal to subordinate the working class to the bureaucratic apparatus of the trade unions and the Democratic Party.

The nomination of Lehman must now become the starting point of a campaign to encourage and develop resistance from workers across the auto industry and the world. This includes:

- Building rank-and-file committees in every plant and workplace, controlled by workers themselves and independent of the UAW apparatus, to transfer power to the shop floor.

- Uniting these committees through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, linking workers across plants, companies, industries and national borders.

- Developing the fight in the factories and workplaces into an independent political movement of the working class against both parties of American capitalism, the Democrats and Republicans.

- Connecting the struggle of autoworkers in the United States with the international wave of resistance.

The issues raised in the UAW election are universal. The same capitalist crisis driving autoworkers into rebellion is rousing workers throughout the world. In Mexico, auto parts workers have occupied factories against layoffs and closures. In Turkey, miners have broken through police barricades, seized mines and defied detentions and armed attacks by company thugs. In Italy, general strikes have repeatedly shut down transport, logistics, schools and public services against austerity, genocide and war.

Workers everywhere confront unbearable prices, layoffs, speedup and poverty wages, while capitalist governments answer social opposition with dictatorship, police violence, attacks on immigrants and the expansion of war. On the eve of the UAW convention, Elon Musk became the world's first trillionaire, a grotesque expression of the domination of society by a capitalist oligarchy whose wealth is built on the intensified exploitation of the working class.

Nothing will be resolved through appeals to this oligarchy, its parties or the union apparatuses that enforce its demands. The decisive question is the development of the class struggle: the smashing of the control of the trade union bureaucracy, the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, and the unification of workers across industries and national borders through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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