

Candidate for UAW president denounces union’s “shotgun vote” at Nexteer: “Something is rotten in Saginaw”

Our reporter
23 June 2026

On June 25-26, the United Auto Workers union is holding a ratification vote on a fourth tentative agreement for 1,700 workers at the Nexteer Automotive plant in Saginaw, Michigan after workers voted down three previous pro-company deals. Instead of holding the vote at the union hall, this time the UAW International and Local 699 officials are forcing workers to vote inside the plant, in a scheme widely seen by workers to suppress opposition and ram through the agreement.

Earlier this month, Antwiane Sanders, a Nexteer worker with more than 10 years, was fired when he criticized a UAW International Servicing Rep who was pushing the deal at a contract rollout meeting also held inside the plant. Workers report that members of the union’s bargaining committee called a supervisor to fire Sanders after he left the meeting and went to a breakroom.

The fourth deal differs little from the three previous ones workers voted down. It includes a starting wage of \$19.50 an hour and for current workers tops out at \$27 an hour in 2030. The is the same workers at the former General Motors Saginaw Steering Plant made in 2005—even though the cost of living has risen by more than 70 percent over the last two decades.

Will Lehman, a rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania who was nominated at last week’s UAW Constitutional Convention in Detroit to run for UAW president, has issued an open letter to Nexteer workers condemning the vote as a fraud and urging them to stand firm. Lehman, a socialist

who ran for UAW president in 2022 on a platform of transferring power from the bureaucracy to the rank and file, called the in-plant ratification vote “not a legitimate vote” but “a shotgun affair designed to silence opposition to a pro-company deal and get the contract passed by whatever means necessary.”

Lehman’s statement opens by acknowledging the scope of what Nexteer workers have accomplished in 12 weeks of struggle. “Over the last 12 weeks,” he writes, “you have voted down three UAW-backed contracts, forced local union officials to hold a strike authorization vote, and overwhelmingly voted to walk out to defend your jobs and livelihoods.” But at every step, he notes, “UAW officials—from the International down to the regional and local level—have acted not as your representatives but as your enemies.”

On the substance of TA4, Lehman is unsparing. The agreement will “only pave the way for massive job cuts” and includes “poverty starting wages and raises that keep pay far below what workers at this factory were earning in 2005.” It also includes “phony COLA and profit-sharing schemes.” Those provisions alone, he argues, are “reasons enough to throw this deal in the garbage.”

But the more immediate issue, Lehman argues, is the corrupt process being used to force through the vote. He draws a sharp historical parallel: “Throughout history we have seen such travesties of democratic rights—poll taxes and literacy tests in the Jim Crow South used to deprive African Americans and poor whites of the right to vote; Trump’s threats to deploy

ICE agents to polling stations during this year’s election.” The in-plant vote, he argues, belongs in the same category—aimed not at restricting who can vote, but at press-ganging workers into voting yes under conditions of direct management surveillance.

The scheme, Lehman explains, was engineered in the wake of the third contract rejection on May 29 by Local 699 and plant management with the backing of outgoing UAW Region 1D Director Steve Dawes and International Servicing Representative Jason Tuck. Union officials then held contract rollout meetings inside the plant as a trial run. When Antwiane Sanders publicly called Tuck a “bum,” he was fired.

Moving the vote into the plant eliminates the limited protections that have existed in previous ratification votes. “In previous ratification votes,” Lehman writes, “rank-and-file workers were able to distribute flyers opposing the TA and openly campaign for its defeat.” Now, “any worker who campaigns openly against the deal on Thursday or Friday risks the same fate as Brother Sanders.” Lehman also notes that newly hired workers—“some fresh from management orientation sessions”—may be voting on the contract, calling it “a cynical exploitation of workers” who have no job security whatsoever.

UAW President Shawn Fain, Dawes and the Local 699 bargaining committee have all sanctioned the arrangement. Invoking Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Lehman writes: “Something is rotten in Saginaw.” He notes that the UAW convention in Detroit last week laid bare the chasm between the bureaucracy and the membership it claims to represent. Convention delegates voted to give International Executive Board members raises of \$10,000 to \$30,000 while reneging on promises to lower union dues. Fain then presided over a retirement ceremony for Dawes—who earned \$229,813 last year—praising him for demonstrating “solidarity that inspires us,” even as Dawes oversaw the sellouts at both American Axle and Nexteer.

Lehman situates the Nexteer struggle within a broader upsurge in the auto parts sector. “Dana workers have massively rejected UAW-backed contracts. So have workers at Bridgewater Interiors. The American Axle settlement will leave those workers earning far less in 2030 than they were making in 2008.” Meanwhile, in the Big Three assembly plants, he notes, opposition is deepening to automation-driven job cuts, forced

overtime and deadly working conditions. The UAW bureaucracy, he writes, “is sitting on a powder keg.”

Lehman’s nomination for UAW president at the convention, he makes clear, is an expression of that broader movement from below. “I am not fighting for a seat at Solidarity House,” he writes. “I am fighting to build a movement from below—of rank-and-file workers who will end the corporate dictatorship enforced by the UAW bureaucracy and put power in the hands of workers on the shop floor.”

He closes with a historical appeal: as the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, Lehman calls on workers to draw lessons from the insurgent committees that organized in every town and village to root out defenders of the British monarchy. “Today, to fight the modern kings and oligarchs, workers must build that same kind of powerful, self-organized movement in every workplace—and link our struggles against the global corporations with our class brothers and sisters around the world.”

Whatever the outcome of the upcoming vote, Lehman warns, the underlying conflict will not be resolved. “There is going to be a struggle at Nexteer over job cuts, speedup and working conditions regardless of what happens this week.” He calls on workers to expand the rank-and-file committee they have built, so that—in the words of a Nexteer worker he quotes—“authority can be transferred from the UAW apparatus to you yourselves.”

His message ends simply: “Vote NO. Expand the committee. The fight is yours to win.”



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