

Rank-and-file candidate for UAW president Will Lehman issues statement to Nexteer workers: “A contract ratified under those conditions is not legitimate”

Our reporters
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Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker from Macungie, Pennsylvania and socialist candidate for UAW president, has issued a statement to workers at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan following the fraudulent ratification of a fourth tentative agreement (TA4) by UAW Local 699 officials on June 26.

Lehman, who was nominated to run for UAW president at the union’s Constitutional Convention in Detroit earlier this month, declared that the ratification vote—conducted under conditions of intimidation, management collaboration and the firing of a worker who opposed the deal—should be considered “null and void.” His statement calls on Nexteer workers to guard and expand their rank-and-file committee, demand the reinstatement of fired worker Antwiane Sanders and continue fighting the UAW bureaucracy’s imposition of a contract that leaves workers worse off in real terms than they were in 2005.

Local 699 officials announced the ratification of TA4 by 57 to 43 percent overall, with production workers—who make up the majority of Nexteer’s 1,700 employees—voting 54 to 46 percent to approve. The narrow margin came after workers had previously rejected three tentative agreements: by 96 percent on April 2, by 73 percent on May 15, and by 55 to 45 percent on May 29. Workers also delivered an 86 percent strike authorization vote on May 21, a mandate the UAW apparatus proceeded to ignore.

Lehman condemned every step of the bureaucracy’s conduct. “At every point, the UAW bureaucracy acted not as your representatives but as your enemies,” he wrote. “They extended your contract behind your backs. They declared it illegal to strike. They ignored your 86 percent strike mandate.”

When those methods failed to break workers’ resistance, the bureaucracy escalated. The fourth tentative agreement, Lehman noted, differs in no essential respect from the

previous three that the workers had already rejected—the same top rate of \$27 an hour that Saginaw Steering workers were earning in 2005, with the cost of living up more than 70 percent since then, the same signing bonus and COLA gimmicks, and no protection against the automation cuts slated to eliminate hundreds of jobs.

The firing of Antwiane Sanders

Central to Lehman’s statement is the case of Antwiane Sanders, a Nexteer worker with more than 10 years in the plant who was fired after standing up at a June 12 contract rollout meeting held on company property and criticizing UAW International Servicing Rep Jason Tuck. Members of the UAW Local 699 bargaining committee responded by calling a supervisor. Sanders was subsequently terminated.

“The union had a worker fired for opposing the union’s contract,” Lehman wrote. “I want to say plainly what that is. That is not a labor organization. That is a company police force with union dues paying the salaries.”

The TA4 ratification vote itself was then overseen by hand-picked supporters of the contract, moved onto company property where every “No” voter could be identified and targeted, and administered to newly hired workers, who were permitted to vote before completing their probationary periods and fired afterwards. That after all of this the contract passed among production workers by only 54 to 46 percent, Lehman argued, exposes the degree to which the result was manufactured. “A contract ratified under those conditions is not legitimate,” he stated. “It should be regarded as null and void.”

Lehman drew attention to the strategic power Nexteer

workers hold and the broader movement their struggle was threatening to ignite. Nexteer produces steering components that feed directly into GM, Ford and Stellantis assembly lines. A genuine strike, he wrote, would shut down Big Three production within days. “That is why the entire UAW apparatus—that just voted itself raises of \$10,000 to \$30,000 at the Detroit convention—was determined to prevent a strike. Not because it would fail, but because it would succeed.”

The UAW convention, Lehman noted, featured appearances by Democratic politicians, including former GM executive Debbie Dingell, who voted in 2022 to ban a railroad strike and impose a contract on workers they previously rejected. UAW Region 1D Director Steve Dawes, who drew a salary of \$229,813 last year, was celebrated at his retirement. These were not incidental details but a window into the apparatus which the workers had been fighting.

Lehman connected the Nexteer struggle to a series of rank-and-file revolts unfolding across the auto parts sector: Dana workers who have rejected UAW-backed contracts by 90 percent margins, Bridgewater Interiors workers fighting the same fight, and American Axle workers in Three Rivers, Michigan whose 10-day strike the bureaucracy strangled on the eve of the convention—giving workers less than 48 hours to review 118 pages of contract language under threats of scab replacement. “Their mission was containment,” Lehman wrote. “Yours was the opposite.”

The rank-and-file committee: the decisive achievement

Lehman identified the Nexteer Workers Rank-and-File Committee (NWRFC) as the most decisive achievement of the 12-week struggle. The bureaucracy repeatedly warned workers not to listen to “unauthorized social media”—by which it meant the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter and the Nexteer Workers RFC—precisely because the committee gave workers’ opposition a conscious organizational form.

“Without the committee, the spontaneous fury of workers who had voted down a contract by 96 percent would have had no organized form,” Lehman wrote. “With it, that fury became a force: exposing each new sellout, warning workers about bureaucratic methods, reaching out to American Axle and Dana workers in a common fight.”

He stressed that the committee’s independence must be maintained, not only from the UAW bureaucracy but from both corporate-controlled political parties. “The Democrats and the Republicans both serve the corporations,” he wrote. “The committee answers to the workers, and nobody else.”

Lehman called on Nexteer workers to reject any attempt by the bureaucracy to sow divisions between younger and older workers over the ratification outcome. He laid out a series of immediate demands: the reinstatement of Antwiane Sanders with full back pay; the recall of the bargaining committee, including members who secured personal transfers to electrician programs paying nearly double the production rate as their reward for delivering the contract; and preparation to resist the automation cuts that will eliminate hundreds of jobs under cover of the agreement.

Lehman was nominated for UAW president at the June Constitutional Convention by rank-and-file workers, including a leading member of the Nexteer RFC; a victimized Dana worker from Warren, Michigan; and Big Three workers. He is running on a socialist program aimed not at managing the union apparatus more humanely but at transferring power from the bureaucracy to the rank and file.

“I am not running to get a seat at the table with GM and Ford and the Democrats who serve them,” he wrote. “My campaign is for the transfer of power from the bureaucracy to the rank and file, in every factory and every workplace.”

Lehman also called on Nexteer workers to join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which connects workers across plants, industries and borders—including in Mexico, Canada, China and internationally.

“Build the committee. Support my campaign. Drive out the traitors. Fight to reinstate Antwiane Sanders. Oppose every victimization. Mobilize against the coming automation cuts,” Lehman concluded. “The fight is yours to win.”



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