

Rank-and-file candidate for UAW president Will Lehman calls on Deere workers to reject 2-year contract extension

Our reporter
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Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks assembly worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania and rank-and-file candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, issued a statement Saturday calling on the 10,000 John Deere workers in Iowa, Illinois and Kansas to reject the company's proposal for a two-year contract extension and to rebuild the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which played a decisive role in the five-week strike of 2021.

Agricultural equipment giant John Deere announced the proposal earlier this month, citing the need for "stability" under conditions of falling demand and "economic volatility." The current six-year agreement, imposed after the UAW apparatus shut down the 2021 strike, does not expire until October 2027. The company's offer would extend it to October 2029 in exchange for 4 percent wage increases in 2026 and 2027 and a one-time \$3,000 bonus payable in November. All other terms of the 2021 contract would remain locked in place. Deere has set a deadline of midnight, August 31, and no full contract language has been released. Far from rejecting the proposal, UAW officials have announced they will bring it to a membership vote.

"This is a preemptive strike against the membership," Lehman wrote. "Deere and the UAW apparatus have watched Nexteer workers vote down three contracts. They've watched American Axle workers walk out. They've watched Dana workers reject UAW-backed deals by 90 percent margins. They are terrified that Deere workers might lead the fight again—and they're trying to lock you in before you can organize."

Lehman, who traveled to the Quad Cities (the region of five cities in Iowa and Illinois) in 2022 to speak with

striking Deere workers during his first campaign for UAW president, was nominated for the union's top office at the UAW Constitutional Convention in Detroit last month. His campaign calls for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and the transfer of decision-making power to workers on the shop floor through a network of rank-and-file committees.

In his statement, Lehman exposed the pro-company terms of the extension proposal. "Four percent—with a war on Iran driving up fuel costs, with Trump's tariffs hitting Deere for \$600 million that the company will pass straight to you, with food prices climbing. Four percent is a pay cut in real terms," he wrote. "The \$3,000 bonus is a one-time payment that disappears. It doesn't compound. It doesn't build your pension. It's the cheapest way to buy two years of labor peace."

The proposal comes as Deere is awash in cash. The company holds roughly \$9.3 billion in cash and short-term investments and reported \$1.28 billion in net income in the third quarter of Fiscal Year 2025. Its stock has gained approximately 180 percent over the past five years, and it paid shareholders \$6.48 per share in annual dividends. At the same time, the company laid off 238 workers in August 2025, including 71 at its Waterloo Foundry, and froze general merit increases for salaried employees for Fiscal Year 2026.

"Four percent and a bonus, while the company swims in billions," Lehman wrote. "That's not a serious offer."

The statement placed particular emphasis on the significance of the phrase "preserves all terms," which has featured prominently in descriptions of the company's offer. The current agreement is the product of one of the most bitter betrayals in recent UAW

history. In October 2021, Deere workers rejected a tentative agreement by 90 percent and walked out on strike for five weeks, winning broad support from workers across the country and internationally, including from Deere workers in Germany and France. The UAW apparatus responded by isolating the strike, starving workers on poverty-level strike pay and forcing three votes until, in Lehman's words, "exhaustion produced a 'yes.'" During the struggle, a local vice president openly suggested that work at the Waterloo plant could be outsourced to Mexico.

The resultant contract entrenched the tier system, left the Continuous Improvement Pay Plan (CIPP) in management's hands and failed to restore healthcare for retirees. "'Preserving all terms' locks that sellout in place until 2029," Lehman wrote, noting that the extension contains "no changes to the tier system, no job security, no layoff moratorium, no retiree healthcare. The company hasn't even pretended to address what workers need."

Lehman drew a direct connection between the Deere proposal and the rebellion now spreading throughout the auto parts sector, above all, at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan, where workers rejected three successive contracts—by 96 percent, 73 percent and 55 percent—and voted by 86 percent to authorize a strike. The UAW ignored the strike mandate, brought back essentially the same deal a fourth time, held the ratification vote on company property, where every "no" voter could be identified and declared the contract ratified. Veteran worker Antwiane Sanders was fired after criticizing a UAW representative.

"That is your future if you let the apparatus handle this," Lehman warned. "An 'unexpected' extension, a below-inflation raise, a one-time bonus, a deadline designed to stop a fight—It's the Nexteer playbook in a different suit." The top wage rate imposed at Nexteer, \$27 an hour, is the same rate GM workers at Saginaw Steering Gear made in 2005, even though the cost of living is 70 percent higher today.

The statement also pointed to the UAW Constitutional Convention as proof that the UAW "is a union in name only." While Deere was preparing its offer, delegates in Detroit voted raises of \$10,000 to \$30,000 for top officers, on top of the \$276,000 salary already drawn by UAW President Shawn Fain. The apparatus consumes \$90 to \$100 million in payroll

annually, with nearly 470 employees taking home over \$100,000 a year, while sitting on \$1.1 billion in assets, \$800 million of it invested on Wall Street. The convention blocked a dues reduction members had been promised, raised strike pay by only \$50 a week and said nothing about the struggles at Nexteer, American Axle or Dana. Former UAW President Ray Curry, who presided over the 2021 Deere sellout, was welcomed back as a guest of honor.

"This bureaucracy can't be reformed. It must be abolished," Lehman wrote. "The union's \$1.1 billion, built from our dues, must be placed under the democratic control of the rank and file."

Lehman called on Deere workers to reject the extension outright, arguing there is "nothing to vote on" since workers already have a contract that runs to October 2027, and to revive the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, independent of the UAW bureaucracy and both corporate parties, to prepare for the coming contract fight. He urged workers to link up with workers at the Big Three, Nexteer, American Axle, Dana, Magna, Bridgewater Interiors and CNH through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and to build ties with Deere workers in Germany, France, Brazil, India and Mexico.

"Mexican and German workers are not your enemies," Lehman wrote. "The enemy is in the boardrooms in Moline and at Solidarity House in Detroit."



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