Public defenders strike in New York City and Detroit; Will Lehman, socialist candidate for UAW president, calls for unified walkout

Our reporters
30 July 2026

More than 500 public defender workers are now on strike in New York City and Detroit, in an expanding rebellion against poverty wages, healthcare cuts and crushing caseloads. The strikers—attorneys, social workers, paralegals, investigators and clerical staff—are members of the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys (ALAA)-UAW Local 2325.

Some 230 workers at the Neighborhood Defender Service (NDS) walked out on July 24 at offices in Harlem, New York and in Detroit. They were joined Monday by roughly 300 workers at the Bronx Defenders, which provides free representation to Bronx residents facing criminal, family, immigration and housing cases. Informational pickets have also been set up by public defenders in Houston, San Antonio and San Marcos, Texas.

NDS management has proposed ending no-premium, no-deductible healthcare over the life of a three-year contract while offering a 1 percent cost-of-living adjustment against inflation running at roughly 3.5 percent—a cut in real wages every year of the agreement.

Management has responded by pleading poverty. NDS deputy executive director Shannon Anglero declared that funding is “tightly constrained” and that “the cost of healthcare is not going to go down.” Bronx Defenders Executive Director Juval O. Scott acknowledged the organization is hemorrhaging attorneys because of inadequate pay but insisted there “was limited funding available to us.”

These claims are an indictment of the capitalist system itself. The Wayne County Criminal Justice Center, where Detroit NDS workers are picketing, cost the county $502.8 million, while billionaire developer Dan Gilbert’s Bedrock company was handed the prime downtown properties the county vacated as part of the deal. Money for a 2,500-bed jail complex and a real estate windfall for a billionaire is always available; money for the workers who stand between a poor person and jail never is.

On Tuesday, Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania and the rank-and-file socialist candidate for UAW president in this October’s election, issued a statement of solidarity with the strikers and a call for the walkout to be expanded across the entire legal services sector and beyond.

“I send you my unconditional solidarity, and I call on all UAW members and workers in every industry to give your strike active support,” Lehman said. “I am a socialist, and I am running to abolish the apparatus that sits on top of this union and transfer power to rank-and-file workers.”

Lehman took up management’s claims of financial constraint directly. Anglero “may be describing her budget accurately, and that is the point,” he said. “What is handed to you as unavoidable financial reality is a political decision about who this society exists to serve.”

He pointed to the class character of the work the strikers perform. “Consider who you defend—the immigrant worker facing a deportation flight, the mother fighting through family court for her children, the tenant hauled before a judge for the crime of living in poverty. These are workers and workers’ families, and their conditions are not ‘policy failures’ but the ruthless function of capitalism, a system in which a handful of billionaires own the wealth the working class produces while the courts, the jails and the

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deportation machine exist to oppress us."

That machine, Lehman warned, is being vastly expanded. "The Trump administration has built ICE into a modern-day Gestapo that seizes workers out of their homes, tears families apart and ships human beings to foreign prisons without so much as a hearing. The same government that tells your employer there is no money for healthcare has unlimited funds for detention camps, for the police and for imperialist wars that the auto industry is being converted to supply."

Lehman placed the isolation of the strikers squarely at the feet of the UAW apparatus headed by President Shawn Fain, who is currently the subject of a federal criminal investigation. Ten days ago, in a message of solidarity with striking Brooklyn Defender Services workers, Lehman warned that only a unified walkout across the sector could break the isolation on which management and the bureaucracy depend. The bureaucracy has worked to impose that isolation. On July 22, Local 2325 officials announced a tentative agreement in Brooklyn and shut that strike down; two days later, NDS workers walked out alone; three days after that, the Bronx Defenders did the same.

"This is not bad timing, and it is not confined to legal services," Lehman said. "It is the strategy of the Fain administration in every section of this union: a bogus 'Stand Up' strike that kept the majority of Big Three workers on the job; denying the right to strike to Nexteer workers who rejected three UAW-backed agreements and were forced to vote on a fourth inside the plant. American Axle, Dana and other auto parts workers were treated the same way, and now legal service workers in four cities are isolated from each other... This bureaucracy cannot be reformed but has to be abolished."

Lehman also warned against the claims of union officials, particularly in New York, that salvation lies in appeals to the Democratic Party administration of Mayor Zohran Mamdani. "A budget written under the supervision of Wall Street can be rewritten by Wall Street the moment workers' demands collide with its interests," he said, "and workers taught to wait on a friendly politician will find they have surrendered the only real power they have."

That power, Lehman insisted, "lies neither in city hall nor in any official's negotiating skill, but in the independent organization of the working class itself—our capacity to unite across workplaces, industries and borders through organizations answerable to nobody but ourselves."

Lehman called on NDS and Bronx Defenders workers to establish rank-and-file committees at every office, elected by workers themselves, with every proposal and bargaining session reported to the membership in full and in real time, "so that no agreement can be handed to you as a finished fact."

He urged Local 2325 members to reject the logic of settling one chapter at a time, to fight for a common expiration date and a common walkout across the sector, and to extend that appeal to transit, healthcare, education and city workers facing the same attacks. He called on UAW members in metro Detroit, New York and Texas to bring their co-workers to the picket lines, and on all workers to join and build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

"The October UAW election is not a matter of choosing a better representative to act on your behalf," Lehman concluded. "I am not asking you to put me in power; I am calling on you to take power yourselves... Do not let them pick you off one shop at a time. Expand the strike, build the committees, and take this fight into your own hands."

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