UAW presidential debate reveals class divide between socialist autoworker Will Lehman and pro-apparatus candidates

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The UAW presidential candidate forum held online the evening of July 30 laid bare the gulf between rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, a socialist, and the five other candidates, who are contending for control of an apparatus sitting atop $1.25 billion in net assets.

Every candidate apart from Lehman is a product of the apparatus or a contender to run it. Incumbent Shawn Fain is under federal criminal investigation, as the Justice Department has convened a grand jury and subpoenaed the Monitor over findings that Fain abused his office to obtain benefits for his fiancée and her sister, then retaliated against Vice President Rich Boyer for refusing them. Boyer, now running against Fain, negotiated the 2023 Stellantis contract that opened the door to the mass firing of temporary workers and the layoff of thousands more.

The other three candidates are Brian Keller, a Stellantis Mopar worker who ran in 2022 and won support at several assembly plants before endorsing Fain in the runoff; Tricia Geiger, a highly-paid UAW International servicing representative; and Greg Mooney, recording secretary of Local 2147 at General Dynamics Land Systems in Lima, Ohio, a supporter of Autoworkers for Trump.

In his opening statement, Lehman placed the election in its real context:

> We as workers confront historic attacks on our conditions and our lives. Workers' share of the national income is the lowest since records have been kept. Escalating global war is driving up prices. Paychecks don't cover basic necessities in a country that just minted its first trillionaire. More than 21,000 autoworker jobs have been wiped out since the start of 2024. The corporations aim to use AI and automation to carry out a global jobs massacre. Democratic rights are being torn down, and our immigrant brothers are hunted by ICE agents.
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> Every year in this country, more than 5,000 workers die on the job because safety is subordinated to profit. In our plants, Antonio Gaston, Ronald Adams Sr., Gregory Knopf were crushed to death under the 2023 contract that this leadership called "historic." This month, workers were carried out on stretchers as smoke filled the plants and the lines kept running.

Lehman then told members where their dues go: 560 International staffers were paid more than $100,000 a year; Fain was paid $276,000 last year, 6.6 times what the average member earns; $118 million was spent on the apparatus's own officers and staff, 14 times what it paid out in strike benefits. "This was never about a few corrupt officials," Lehman said. "The bureaucracy as a whole is an arm of management."

He ended his opening remarks by calling for the independent mobilization of autoworkers and the working class, stating:

> There is a growing mood of anger and rebellion among autoworkers, healthcare workers, educators, legal aid workers and workers in the UAW. What we need is a strategy and an organization, class struggle instead of class collaboration, internationalism instead of nationalism, rank-and-file committees in every plant and workplace, controlled by workers, linked across industries, to abolish the bureaucracy and transfer power to the shop floor. This campaign is not about what I will do for you. It is about what you are going to do.

The moderator, retired *New York Times* labor reporter Steve Greenhouse, opened the debate by calling the UAW one of the nation's greatest unions and pledging to be "scrupulously neutral." His first question exposed this pretense, as he asked what had "enabled the UAW to come away with a victory in the stand-up strike" against GM, Ford and Stellantis in 2023 and whether it had made mistakes.

That the strike was a victory was not offered for debate, and five of the six candidates accepted the premise. Fain called the union's contract campaign "brilliant," declaring, "I'm proud of what we've done," and touted the general strike he claims to be preparing for May Day 2028.

Lehman alone rejected these claims, stating bluntly, "It was not a real strike. It was a disaster. It was a Hollywood strike." Workers had voted overwhelmingly to strike, but at most 30 percent were called out while the rest worked overtime. Those who did walk out were starved on inadequate strike pay. Lehman stressed: "That's not solidarity. That's isolation."

Lehman noted that the "victory" led to thousands of temporary part-time workers being fired, followed by job cuts at Factory Zero, Ford's Rouge Electric Vehicle Center and the battery plants, and the deaths of coworkers. The corporate media billed the strike as a "historic"

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gain, he said, while it divided workers and kept most on the line. None of the other candidates answered Lehman's analysis.

A critical aspect of the debate was the recent death threat made against Lehman by Raymond L. Jensen Jr., a UAW organizer who was until recently assistant director of UAW Region 9, Lehman's own region, and paid roughly $202,000 in 2025. On July 16, Jensen posted an AI-generated image on Lehman's public campaign Facebook page showing him bound and gagged, blood running from his mouth, with a masked man aiming an automatic rifle at his back. Jensen, whose Facebook profile carries an "I Support Shawn Fain" badge, posted it beneath Lehman's statement on the federal investigation into Fain.

Threatening a union member to interfere with his rights in a union election is a federal crime. Until Thursday night, neither Fain nor any member of the union's executive board had said a word about it. At the debate, Lehman explained that the threat was not just about him but about the response of the apparatus to all rank-and-file opposition, referring to Antwiane Sanders, a Nexteer worker fired for speaking out against UAW officials at a contract meeting inside the plant.

Fain first tried to ignore the issue and only responded when Lehman confronted him directly. "I don't condone that stuff," he said, before adding: "If you're running for president, get ready, brother, because you'll be getting them every day." This statement effectively endorsed and doubled down on the threat. Fain gave no indication whatsoever that Jensen would face any consequences.

A veteran Detroit autoworker who watched the forum told the WSWS:

> Fain said it was wrong, but took no responsibility for any of it. Then he kind of gave a dig by saying that's something you have to get used to if you're running for president. Making death threats is, in fact, a crime.
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> It's what Will was saying from the beginning. You have people like Ronald Adams, who lost their life, and you never hear anything from the union leadership about that.

Asked what the union's stance toward the Trump administration should be, Lehman warned that Trump is "trying to enact a fascist dictatorship" and that workers should back neither capitalist party. Tariffs serve the ruling class, he explained: They raise prices, save no jobs and set workers in one country against those in another. He denounced both the Trump and Biden administrations as war criminals.

The other candidates avoided any sharp criticism of Trump and signaled a willingness to bargain with the fascist in the White House, above all, over tariffs, which every other candidate supported. Fain boasted of the collaboration with Trump, saying the UAW had been in US-Mexico-Canada Agreement talks in Mexico City and had "worked very close" with U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer.

A question on organizing in the academic sector exposed what unites the five against Lehman: a preoccupation with the dues base on which the salaries of the apparatus rest. Boyer complained that higher education did not deliver "the best bang for our buck" and asked how long it would take to recoup the $100 million allotted for organizing. Geiger, Mooney and Keller said the same.

Lehman answered that the money belonged in the strike fund, and that gains won on the shop floor, not paid staff, draw workers to the UAW. What the union should not be funding, he said, are "cushy seats for organizers who do nothing and contribute nothing to the union, just going around and earning a paycheck for nothing." Academic workers who turned to the UAW in the hopes that they would be united with autoworkers in their struggles found an organization that sells them out and bars its own members from striking over political demands, including opposition to the Gaza genocide.

In his closing statement, Lehman elaborated on his program, stating:

> Let's be honest about the situation we face. The ruling class is waging an all-out war on the working class. ... We cannot pretend that the interests of workers in the UAW have nothing to do with what is happening in this country and the world. The reality is the interests of workers and the interests of the capitalists are antagonistic. They cannot be reconciled. We can win what we need only through struggle.
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> Every other candidate is telling you, "Elect me, put a better person at the top of the apparatus, and things will change." Workers have been through that four years ago. Shawn Fain made the same promise, and every worker knows how that ended. Put a new individual at the top of the same apparatus, and you get the same policies because the apparatus answers to the companies and to itself. It defends the social and economic system based on the exploitation of the workers.

The alternative was a new power built from the shop floor and linked across industries and borders and the fight for a fundamental reorganization of economic life. "Socialism means equality," he said. "It means workers' control of production. It means the international unity of the working class based on our interests. That fight has already begun." He pointed to the contract battles at Bridgewater Interiors and American Axle, and to the millions marching against dictatorship: "The working class, the sleeping giant of American politics, is beginning to awake."

Lehman ended by paraphrasing Thomas Paine, stating, "'These are the times that try men's souls.' The complacent bureaucrat and the lying reformer will, in this crisis, betray the fight. But the worker who stands up now deserves the love and thanks of all humanity."

The debate made clear that the only social force capable of halting the jobs massacre, the killings in the plants and the drive to world war is the working class itself, organized through its own rank-and-file committees. Lehman ended with an appeal to act on that, stating: "Vote for me, but do more than vote. Build. Build the committees, build this movement. That is where our power is."

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