

3 weeks before UAW ballot deadline, campaign by rank-and-file candidate challenges pro-corporate apparatus

Our reporters
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With three weeks remaining before the October 5 deadline for mail ballots to be returned and counted, the election of top United Auto Workers officers—including UAW president—is taking place amid mounting economic assault on the working class. Automation-driven job cuts, inflation fueled by the Trump administration’s criminal war against Iran and its trade-war policies, and ever-worsening conditions in the factories have produced widespread opposition to incumbent president Shawn Fain, who oversaw the sellout of the 2023 contract struggle.

That sellout led to the elimination of thousands of jobs at GM, Ford and Stellantis, the workplace deaths of four Detroit Three autoworkers and long hours of forced overtime. At the same time, the Fain administration has faced growing opposition from low-paid auto parts workers who have repeatedly rejected UAW-backed contracts at Nexteer, Dana and other suppliers, and UAW academic workers at University of California, Columbia and other universities who have sought to strike not only to improve their wages and conditions but to oppose Trump’s witch hunt against anti-genocide protesters and other opponents of imperialist war.

Fain was promoted as a “union reformer” by the corporate media and such political forces as the Democratic Socialists of America. He backed Joe Biden while the Democratic president oversaw the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, and since Trump’s election he has been one of the president’s most fervent supporters on tariffs against Canada, Mexico and other countries.

Fain faces five challengers: Vice President Richard Boyer, the lead negotiator of the UAW-Stellantis sellout agreement; Tricia Geiger, a long-time UAW functionary; Greg Mooney, a supporter of Autoworkers for Trump; Brian Keller, a Stellantis worker who backed Fain in the 2022 runoff and is a fervent economic nationalist; and Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president.

Lehman has won growing support for his call for the abolition of the UAW apparatus and the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor. He has also called for the unity of US, Canadian and Mexican workers against Trump’s tariffs and the attack of the global auto corporations—underscored by the recent announcement that Volkswagen is cutting 50,000 to 100,000 jobs.

The fight to free Bogdan Syrotiuk

Lehman has posted a series of videos on his campaign web site outlining the fundamental issues facing autoworkers, beginning with opposition to the escalating drive toward world war.

In one video, posted September 6, Lehman demanded the immediate and unconditional release of Bogdan Syrotiuk, the 27-year-old Ukrainian socialist and opponent of war sentenced on August 10 to 15 years in prison for writing that Russian and Ukrainian workers have no reason to kill each other and calling on them to unite against the war.

“We have been told for four and a half years that Ukraine is fighting a war for democracy, but it has become a police state that jails its left-wing opponents,” Lehman said. He noted that Zelensky’s term expired in May 2024 and that he has ruled by decree ever since under permanent martial law, with 11 opposition parties suspended, the largest banned outright and strikes prohibited.

The war in Ukraine, Lehman warned, is “a central battleground in the opening stages of a third world war, which is now merging with Trump’s criminal war against Iran.”

Lehman pointed out that UAW members build weapons at General Dynamics Electric Boat, Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics Land Systems and plants across the country being retooled for war. “The means of destruction must be converted into means of production geared for human needs, with every job guaranteed and the workers who do the work deciding what’s getting made.”

He contrasted this with Fain’s record. Despite Fain’s posturing as an opponent of war, Lehman notes, the incumbent has promoted UAW plants for years as the “Arsenal of Democracy,” was among Biden’s closest labor allies during the Ukraine war, and endorsed “Genocide Joe” at the UAW’s January 2024 political conference while the slaughter in Gaza was underway—as delegates chanting “Ceasefire Now” were dragged from the hall by UAW security and the Secret Service.

“Our paychecks do not cover groceries and rent”

In a second video, posted September 7, Lehman outlined the conditions facing the working class this Labor Day. More than 21,000 auto industry jobs have been wiped out since the start of 2024, and for every dollar workers produce, less than 53 cents comes back in wages—the lowest share since the government began measuring it in 1947. “Our paychecks do not cover groceries and rent,” he said.

On June 12, three days before the UAW Constitutional Convention opened, Elon Musk became the first trillionaire in human history. The richest 1 percent own nearly a third of everything in the country; the bottom half own barely 2.5 percent. More than 5,000 workers are killed on the job every year. This summer, workers were carried out of plants on stretchers while wildfire smoke filled the buildings and management kept the lines running.

“These are not separate problems,” Lehman said. “They are part of the same offensive of the ruling class, which is cutting our wages, waging world war, sending ICE agents after immigrant workers, and tearing up our democratic rights.”

The working class has enormous social power, he insisted, but “our hands are tied because the unions are run by a layer of bureaucrats whose salaries, whose investments, and whose whole position in life are tied to the companies and not to us.”

Voter suppression and the fight for rank-and-file committees

A third video, posted September 10, addressed the obstacles workers face in even casting a ballot. Ballots went out on August 21, but if a member has not received one, they have only until September 23 to request a replacement at uawvote.com; September 30 is the last day to be current on dues; and October 5 is the deadline for ballots to be received.

Lehman documented what he called the apparatus’s “systematic voter suppression.” Four years ago, in the first direct election of international officers in the union’s history, only 9 percent of the membership voted—the lowest turnout of any national union election in American history. More ballots came back marked undeliverable than were ever cast. At one California university local with more than 11,000 members, only 29 ballots were returned.

“This was not because of apathy. It was because of voter suppression,” Lehman said. “A worker who does not get a ballot cannot mail one back.” Fain was installed in the runoff with the votes of only 6 percent of the membership. Lehman sued over the suppression, and in June 2024 a federal judge ruled the Labor Department had acted arbitrarily and capriciously—yet the result was allowed to stand under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

“No court and no federal agency will fix this,” Lehman concluded. “The only people who are going to tell the workers in your plant that this election is even happening are you and your co-workers, united in a rank-and-file election committee.”

“A union in name only”

At the beginning of the month, Lehman campaigned at plants in metropolitan Detroit and Toledo, Ohio. At the Stellantis Toledo Assembly Complex on September 2, he spoke with a fifth-generation UAW worker about conditions since the 2023 sellout, which has seen the death of Antonio Gaston and a spike in injuries driven by job cuts and forced overtime imposed with the blessing of the bureaucracy.

A fourth video, posted September 10, captured the exchange. “This isn’t a union. I can tell you that,” the worker said. “It makes absolutely no sense that we got Detroit people driving to Toledo and people living in Toledo driving to Detroit. Everything is set up for us to go against each other. Nothing is for us to work together.”

Lehman replied that the UAW is “a union in name only. What we need is to abolish the layer that keeps blocking us. That’s the reps that are detached from the shop.”

Referring to Gaston and other workers killed in the plant, the worker said: “We’re losing too many men and women in accidents. It’s just not acceptable. They force us in here. People are tired. People are overworked.”

She recalled the March 2020 walkout over COVID-19, when workers were fainting and falling and management said, “Work, work, work”—until workers, including young mothers, stormed the UAW office and forced the shutdown. “I heard them on the news later saying they closed the plant because ‘we love you guys.’ That is not what happened. It was a walkout and it was the workers who forced that.”

“All the leaders up there, wherever they are, none of them are doing what they are supposed to do,” she said. “There’s too much lying, cheating, and stealing.”

Lehman agreed that the walkout was “an action led by the workers. We need organization and leadership. That is what I am saying about establishing what I call rank-and-file committees. It’s about leading from the floor.”



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