

“This movement will be led by workers or it will not be led at all”

Insurgent candidate for UAW president holds campaign meeting on eve of vote count

Our Reporter
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Ballots in the United Auto Workers presidential election were due Monday. The count begins Tuesday, October 6 in the Chicago suburb of Rosemont, Illinois, and results are expected by the end of the week.

In 2022, it took the UAW Monitor four days to count the ballots. Because none of the candidates received a majority, a runoff election was held between the two top vote-getters, with Shawn Fain declared the winner in March 2023 by a mere 477 votes and with the support of barely 6 percent of the 1.1 million active and retired members in the union.

Fain, who promised an end to “company unionism,” has presided over massive layoffs and a further erosion of the living standards and working conditions of UAW members. His opponents, including Vice President Richard Boyer, are largely drawn from the same bureaucracy.

Will Lehman, a rank-and-file worker at Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania, is running as a socialist candidate for UAW president based on a program of abolishing the UAW apparatus and transferring power to workers on the shop floor.

On Sunday, Lehman and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) held an online meeting titled “The Way Forward After the Vote: A Rank-and-File Strategy to Fight Job Cuts, War, and Dictatorship.”

Joining Lehman on the panel of workers were members of the Nexteer Workers Rank-and-File Committee in Saginaw, Michigan, a worker at General Motors’ Flint Assembly plant, a co-worker at the Mack Trucks plant, and a striking worker from National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario. A GM worker from Silao, Mexico, also took part, along with railroad and US postal workers who lead rank-and-file committees in their industries.

The online audience included workers from auto and other industries, including striking UAW members from the Bradford White water heater plant in Middleville, Michigan. Nearly 1,000 workers have since viewed the event on YouTube.

The meeting opened with a video of Lehman’s months-long campaign at plant gates, which will be posted separately. Workers in the video denounce speed-up, understaffing and a string of deaths on the job. They also condemn union representatives they describe as “in bed with” management. An 85-year-old GM retiree says he remembers when the unions did well for workers, and adds, “Now the union represents the management.”

“No election result will stop it”

Lehman began his opening report by explaining that he was running “for one reason, for workers to take power.” He reviewed the campaign’s record. During the Canadian wildfires, it called on workers to act on their own while Fain and his apparatus told them to keep breathing smoke. It backed Nexteer workers who voted down three sellout contracts. And it waged an international campaign that forced the removal of UAW International staff member and Fain backer Raymond Jensen after he made a death threat against the campaign.

“That is what rank-and-file power looks like,” Lehman said. “But this was never about one bureaucrat. We need to get rid of the whole apparatus. That won’t be done by the Monitor, by the courts, or by the two big business parties. It must be done by the rank and file.”

Fain, Lehman said, was billed as a great reformer, but his “Stand-Up Strike” was a fraud. The 2023 contract opened the door to thousands of job cuts, and four Detroit Three workers died on the job. “The experience with Fain has demonstrated beyond any doubt the UAW apparatus cannot be reformed. It is an instrument of the corporations and it must be dismantled and replaced by the organized power of the workers ourselves.”

Lehman stressed that the fight does not end with the vote count. “The ballots are in and the count is about to begin. But whatever the outcome, the working class confronts a historic attack on our jobs, our living standards, and our democratic rights. No election result will stop it. Only the organized power of the working class will stop it.”

Discussing how the global automakers were using AI, robotics and other technologies to wipe out hundreds of thousands of jobs, including at Volkswagen in Germany, he pointed to “dark factories” in China where robots assemble EVs without workers. Ford’s Louisville, Kentucky, overhaul will eliminate about 600 jobs, and GM installed robots at Factory Zero while more than 1,000 workers sat laid off.

“Technology, though, is not our enemy,” he said. “Under capitalism, every advance in productivity is turned against the workers. Workers can only benefit from these advances if they are ripped from private hands and made the collective property of the

working class. That is what socialism means.”

The crisis of capitalism, he continued, “is leading directly to war. Our plants are being retooled for war.” According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers in non-farm industries received the lowest share of national income since records began in 1947. Meanwhile, Lehman said, workers are rejecting UAW-backed contracts at Nexteer, Dana and Bridgewater, 1,200 Bradford White workers are on strike, and millions across Europe are demonstrating against war and austerity. “The working class is rising. What is missing is political leadership.”

He concluded: “We are running out of time. We need to take up this fight on the floor. Nobody is coming to save any of us, including me ... This movement will be led by workers or it will not be led at all. If you wait for a fight to figure out what you are doing, you will be betrayed. If you have a rank-and-file committee, you have the leadership to counter the sellouts and mobilize against job cuts, unsafe conditions, and falling living standards ... That is the task before us, whatever the vote count says.”

Socialism and the study of history

A leader of the Nexteer committee asked how to explain socialism to new members. Lehman recommended starting with classic works such as Marx’s *Wage Labour and Capital*, and framed the issue as workers’ control of production versus shareholder control. “Who should we be working for? Ourselves or someone that’s on a yacht in the South Caribbean that’s never worked a day in their life?”

The Nexteer committee leader described how the UAW ignored three contract rejections, told workers striking was illegal and pushed through a fourth agreement with threats of job losses. Members have still not seen the contract. Antwiane Sanders, a worker with 10 years of seniority, was fired after speaking up against the deal at a rollout meeting. “There’s more solidarity between the union leaders and management than there is with the union leaders and the workers on the floor,” she said.

Lehman said that anger alone is not enough. Once workers understand the economic system, he said, it becomes clear why the bureaucracy, a privileged layer detached from production, acts on behalf of the companies. He said this was why he has insisted on keeping his job at Mack: “It’s not about replacing one bureaucrat with another.”

A worker from GM Flint raised the upcoming 90th anniversary of the Flint sit-down strike. She asked whether the UAW today plays a role similar to the old craft-based American Federation of Labor, which industrial workers had to break from. She noted that the UAW’s founders were socialists. Lehman said production today is globally integrated as never before. The postwar boom rested on the unique position of American capitalism, which no longer exists, so workers must reject the bureaucracy’s nationalism and unite across borders.

Internationalism against nationalism

AJ Pearson, entering his ninth week on strike at National Steel Car, said the United Steelworkers president had told strikers that an “act of solidarity” would be to get another job. He criticized Fain’s support for Trump’s tariffs and the counter-tariffs backed by Unifor and the Steelworkers. He also noted impending layoffs of 300 to 400 workers at the Stelco plant in Hamilton, which once employed nearly 20,000. Lehman explained that tariffs raise prices, reduce sales and produce layoffs. The bureaucracies, he said, cling to nationalism “for material reasons,” because genuine international unity would threaten their positions.

Fernando, a GM worker in Silao, asked how Mexican workers could fight together with workers in the US and Canada. Lehman pointed to the Mack plant in Monterrey, Mexico, which local union officials campaign against. “You can only unite with those workers and proceed together on a mutual class basis if you’re going to beat the company,” he said. Nationalist division, he added, is how US workers have lost more than a million auto jobs since 1979.

Ruth, a postal worker, described deaths of carriers and plant workers that came to light only because rank-and-file committees exposed them. Bill, a railroad track worker, said his company announced record profits and then 1,000 job cuts. “I have more in common with my Mexican worker brother than I do with an American billionaire,” he said.

Asked how to fight automation-driven job cuts, Lehman called for a shorter workweek with no loss in pay. “It is about who controls that technology and for what purpose.” Another worker asked how to build committees “in the face of worker apathy and bureaucratic opposition.” Lehman replied that workers are not apathetic, pointing to strike authorization votes in the high 90 percent range in 2023. “What’s lacking is the political perspective to lead it.”

In his summation, Lehman stressed that the campaign would continue after the ballots are counted. “It’s not just about the election,” he said. He urged workers to contact the campaign to build rank-and-file committees in their workplaces and prepare now for the struggles ahead over job cuts, war and attacks on democratic rights.

Earlier in the discussion, he had pointed to the enormous social power workers hold. “You produce all the wealth,” he said. “That’s the power you have. The shareholders cannot produce that without you.” Once workers understand their class strength, he added, “there’s not going to be anything that can stop them from taking power.”

He closed by saying: “It really comes down to what workers each do on the shop floor that’s going to determine our way forward.”



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