

Saginaw and Detroit autoworkers discuss outcome of UAW election: “Every dictator claims the people are behind them”

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More than 90 percent of the United Auto Workers (UAW) membership boycotted the 2026 election of union officers. Shawn Fain was reinstalled with the votes of just 6 percent of the members.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with three autoworkers—Tom, a leader of the Nexteer Workers Rank-and-File Committee in Saginaw, and Dan and Ron, Stellantis workers in the Detroit area—about the election and what it means. All three supported Will Lehman, the socialist Mack Trucks worker who ran for president on a program of abolishing the union bureaucracy and transferring power to rank-and-file committees.

Tom said the claim that Fain won a “mandate” was “a bucket of crap.” Once “you open it up, it doesn’t smell good. I mean, when you have 7 or 8 percent of the total membership voting, it means that’s all the enthusiasm he could garner out of more than a million members left in this country. There is no enthusiasm, just people feeling stuck with what they got. Every dictator claims the people are behind them. Just look at Captain Orange on the stump, ‘Everybody loves me.’”

Dan, a worker at the Stellantis Detroit Assembly Complex-Jefferson plant, explained why so many stayed home. “I’m not surprised by the lack of voter turnout,” he said. “There’s a lot of people in the plant that I talk to, like they don’t see the union as something that’s for them. They don’t see any connection between the union and better pay and conditions.” The leadership, he said, “is trying to sell you something that you don’t want, like the contracts that workers voted down at Nexteer, Dana and Bridgewater. So, when you have a choice to vote for those same leaders, you choose not to.

“The leadership wants to make it look like they’re effective, and that they are doing what they are supposed to,” Dan continued. “It’s almost like Kim Jong Un in North Korea—They come out like he won 100 percent of the vote. It’s not genuine. The leadership has an incentive to stay in power, and they want to make it look like they’re doing what they said they were going to do. If you know this is just smoke and mirrors and some sort of presentation to where it seems like there is a democratic process when you know there’s not, it makes you not want to participate.”

Dan spoke from experience. “I voted for Fain in 2022. They all say, ‘I’ll be different.’ But then they don’t show any type of track record of improving anything.”

Ron, a worker at the Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), pointed to the contrast between the union’s indifference to its own election and its mobilization for the Democratic Party. “I got a ballot, but it was the same time as we got material from the UAW on the general elections,” he said. “I would have gone out of my way to vote, but it’s all under control. That’s the way most workers feel, that our voice doesn’t have any effect.”

The figures bear him out. The UAW boasted that it mobilized 800 members to knock on doors and make 145,000 phone calls to turn out 112,887 UAW voters during Michigan’s early voting period in the Democratic primaries. That is more people than voted in the UAW’s own election, in which only 98,029 ballots were cast. The union apparatus can find the resources to campaign for the Democrats but not to defend the jobs, wages and democratic rights of its own members.

“Fain won the presidency with a very small percentage of the members,” Ron said. “But they come out and say, ‘We’re going to do whatever we want because the membership voted for us.’ That tells you what they think about the workforce’s votes. They strongarm votes, mysteriously lose votes, and they say the members voted that way. There were even less people supporting Fain than the last time. That means the guys that voted for him the first time got disgusted. It’s like the people who voted for Trump.”

The election figures confirm this assessment. Roughly 1.1 million members were eligible to vote. Only 98,029 ballots were cast, a turnout of 8.9 percent. Fain received 66,166 votes—68 percent of the votes cast for president, but only 6 percent of the membership, about one member in 17. Even this figure includes the votes of the thousands of officials, staff and appointees whose positions depend on the apparatus.

Any claims that low turnout is due to “apathy” is a lie. This is a lie. The election took place after a summer of rebellion in the parts plants. At Nexteer in Saginaw, workers rejected three tentative agreements and voted by 86 percent to strike. The UAW buried the strike vote and pushed through a fourth agreement in a vote held inside the plant, on company property. Workers at Dana and Bridgewater rejected UAW-backed contracts by wide margins.

When workers were asked to vote on contracts, they turned out to reject them. When they were asked to vote for the leadership of the union that imposed those contracts, they stayed away. The mass abstention was not indifference. It was a vote of no

confidence in Fain and the bureaucracy—a decision, arrived at by nine out of every 10 members, that the UAW is a union in name only.

Tom described the consequences of the sellout contract. “We built a rank-and-file committee at our plant. We are meeting and getting out statements. It looks like everybody is getting laid off on the side of the plant that produces parts for Stellantis. I’m going to find out how many guys are affected. This is what our committee warned when Fain and his people rammed through the contract on the fourth try.”

The layoffs are unfolding amid a deepening economic crisis. “People are losing their jobs even as inflation is going up,” Tom continued. “Interest rates are higher too, and that’s putting a kibosh to home sales. Nobody is going into a bank or mortgage office even to inquire about buying a house. The same with car loans. The Big Three is building more cars than they can sell. At the end of the year, they offer these incentives of \$10,000 to \$12,000 off the sticker price, zero interest for six or seven years. That’s why they build the big pickup trucks, SUVs and everything with a high profit margin. When I go down Bay Road in Saginaw, all the dealerships are filled with unsold trucks. They’re not fuel-efficient either. But the Toyota dealership doesn’t have any fuel-efficient cars left to sell.

“Nexteer has sold off some of its plant,” Tom added. “It is not fulfilling its requirements of having so many employees to get a tax abatement. So you’re letting all these companies make unseemly profits, and all that flows to the CEOs and the top echelon. None of it gets down to the bottom.”

Ron drew the connection between the union’s betrayal and the broader assault on democratic rights. “You can see it with the way Trump is threatening to use ICE at the voting polls. The ICE agents are shooting people. If autoworkers strike, will they send ICE to intimidate workers like they do to immigrants? We have immigrant workers from Africa working at SHAP. Are they going to come here and say to the workers, ‘You do what we want or else’? At some point, if they kill a worker, it’s going to teeter between are we going to be intimidated or are we going to have a civil war?

“An execution on TV is a warning of what they want to do in the future,” he said. “It’s to show their power. They don’t only want to exploit us, they want to shoot us like cattle and put it on display. They already have concentration camps. The same ICE agents you thought would be fired are now your guards.”

“A lot of citizens don’t realize we are on the brink of a civil war,” Ron continued. “What has produced this situation? These aren’t isolated incidents. The whole system is breaking down, and it looks like they are taking one more shot by trying a dictatorship. Their system is old and breaking down, and they are in a crisis because workers are more educated, more radical and have the means of communication and travel to connect with each other. The SEP is across the world. Workers might not have met each other, but we are way more linked up than before.”

The union, Ron said, is part of the apparatus of control. “Right now, the UAW and management are policing us over taking FMLA time off. If your health is bad, they’ll tell you to take a Tylenol and send you back to the line. Now people are afraid they

are going to use these Flock cameras to catch workers on medical leave or FMLA. They want to use this to spy on workers. They have all this facial recognition technology, and they check browser history.

“To claim that Fain won a mandate is not true,” Ron said. “Before the elections, workers were saying we have to get rid of him. That was the sentiment across the board. Nothing has changed since he was elected. Everything stayed the same except there was a new face for the regime.”

None of the three drew pessimistic conclusions. On the contrary, they saw in the mass abstention the clearest indication of the potential support for an alternative. “I’ve been thinking, what if the rank and file did its own vote?” Ron said. “The union apparatus would say it wasn’t legitimate. Even if we got thousands of votes and delivered it to them, like a petition, they wouldn’t listen. That is why workers are getting more and more radical.”

He continued, “I’ve seen a lot of changes as an autoworker. We have a sense that we have power. You can see it when you walk on the factory floor on the midnight shift. If not enough of us show up, they can’t start the shift. There is a standstill for an hour, an hour and a half. People are starting to know how essential they are for the products. We could control that. They can’t get production going on Monday if we don’t start it up Sunday night. They’re not starting without us.”

Lehman, he said, “ran as the opposition, telling workers, ‘OK, things can be different. But it is going to take the regular line workers saying no, standing up and saying no—These job cuts and changes to our jobs aren’t going to happen.’ Everyone has to be on the same page and walk off the line. That’s what we did when COVID first hit. We all walked off the job.”

From the beginning, Lehman campaigned not for the reform of a rotten apparatus but for its abolition and the building of rank-and-file committees to organize and provide leadership to the coming struggles over inflation, job cuts, war and dictatorship. These committees must be controlled by the workers themselves and linked across plants, industries and national borders through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The Saginaw workers are fighting on the basis of this perspective. Their rank-and-file committee is meeting, issuing statements and preparing to fight the layoffs at Nexteer. As Ron put it, speaking of the Sterling Heights workers who cast their ballots for Lehman: “Those workers who voted for Will are important for the movement.”



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