FIVE TAKEAWAYS FROM MY TOUR OF AUTO PLANTS

BY WILL LEHMAN
Mack Trucks worker and rank-and-file candidate for UAW president

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last week, due to a parts shortage at the Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania where I work, I was able to tour several auto plants and other workplaces. I spoke with hundreds of workers about my campaign at Ford plants in Dearborn, Michigan and Louisville, Kentucky; Chrysler plants in Warren, Detroit and Toledo; and the GM Flint Assembly Plant. I was also able to speak with striking teachers in Columbus, Ohio and workers who led the historic strike last year at Volvo Trucks in Dublin, Virginia.

These are five takeaways from this tour.

1. There is enormous anger among rank-and-file workers

If you think that you are alone in wanting to fight back, you're wrong. Wherever I went, I encountered immense opposition to corporate exploitation, declining real wages, terrible work conditions, and the danger of layoffs. Workers, young and old, seniority and lower tier, of all races and ethnicities, spoke out about the absence of air conditioning in the plants, the grueling work schedules that keep us away from our families, the inequality caused by two-tier wages and temporary employment, and the impact of inflation.

A worker at the Warren Stamping plant expressed the views of so many when he said, "They always say they're not making enough money to pay decent wages and keep our jobs. Now they're making record profits and still won't give us cost-of-living and raises to keep up with inflation."

2. Workers know that the UAW is not representing them

If there was one statement I heard again and again, it was that the UAW is in the companies' pockets. What is meant by this is not that the workers are in the companies' pockets, but that the UAW bureaucrats are. A worker at Ford's Dearborn Truck plant said the UAW leaders are living on "Easy Street" and the "union is a business for them." At Kentucky Truck, a worker said, "the UAW doesn't exist in the plant." That is, that there is no representation. In Flint, workers said the situation has gotten worse since the UAW officials sold out the 2019 strike. Medical co-pays are up, "the temps got screwed," and the "only ones who say things got better are the guys who were stealing the money," one Flint Assembly worker told me.

We are all aware of the massive corruption scandal, and we all know that it is not a matter of a "few bad apples." There is something deeply sick within the organization itself, overseen by its massive layer of privileged bureaucrats with their six-figure salaries.

3. Workers are eager to hear about the class battles taking place throughout the world

The UAW has long promoted nationalism, the claim that we can defend our interests by opposing workers in other countries. But when I talked to workers about the struggles taking place in the UK, throughout Europe, in Sri Lanka and India, in Mexico and throughout Latin America, there was immense enthusiasm.

I informed Ford workers in Michigan and Kentucky that I had spoken to Ford workers in India and Germany who were fighting plant closings and demands by their unions that they accept deep cuts

in wages and working conditions to supposedly "save" jobs. Instead of a race to the bottom, I said, we needed to organize a coordinated fight across national borders to defend all our jobs and conditions. "Sounds good to me!" a Kentucky Truck worker responded. "I think workers everywhere have got to band together; otherwise, we don't stand a chance. We have the same problems and can work together to solve them. Nothing will get done unless the working people get it done."

4. Workers are talking about more than conditions on the shop floor

Workers are angry about conditions in the plant, but they are also aware that this is part of a broader problem. I talked to workers about the pandemic, which has killed more than 1 million people throughout the US, due to the subordination of human life to private profit. I spoke to workers about the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, and the funneling of tens of billions of dollars for war. Meanwhile, social programs are starved, and teachers in Columbus are told there is no money to fix ventilation systems or clean up rodent-infested schools.

In Flint and Detroit, I drove around and saw cities and neighborhoods devastated by decades of plant closures and layoffs. After making billions, GM and other companies abandoned these cities, leaving them without clean drinking water or other necessities of life. Last year, GM CEO Mary Barra pocketed $23 million, 700 times more than a second-tier GM worker who generates the company's profits. I told workers this inequality is caused by capitalism, and we, the workers, must unite to get rid of this system, or perish.

5. There is enormous interest in socialism

I am a socialist. This means I believe the fight of workers in the UAW and all workers is bound up with a unified struggle to end the rule of the corporate oligarchy and create a system based on equality and international solidarity. Many workers don't really know what socialism is. They don't know that the Flint sit-down strike and other militant struggles to build the UAW in the 1930s were led by socialists. But when I ask them, "Do you think the economy should be based on human need, not profit?", they readily say yes. "If you agree with what I'm saying but don't like the word socialism," I reply, "then it might not be socialism you have a problem with, but what you thought it was."

There is a groundswell of support for my campaign. At every plant I went to, scores of workers quickly signed up to get involved. Workers are looking for a way to fight. My campaign is about mobilizing workers to abolish the entire UAW apparatus and transfer power to workers on the shopfloor through the establishment of rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace. It is about unifying our struggles with the struggles of workers in other industries, in other countries. The reality of the social and economic crisis is driving workers to fight.

Now is the time. As one of the leaders of the Volvo Trucks NRV strike said, "Unless people take a stand, nothing will ever change." Precisely. This campaign is about workers taking a stand. It is not just about me, but about you, about building a network of rank-and-file organizations to finally fight for what we need.

What I am asking you to do:

I am asking you to write to me today at willforuawpresident@gmail.com or call/text (267) 225-6633. Tell me what you think about conditions in your plant or workplace, whether you are an autoworker, manufacturing worker, professional worker, nurse, or educator, and whether you're active or retired. What are the demands you think we need to fight for? What do you want to see changed?

I will use this campaign to get the word out as broadly as possible so that we can all unite and win what we require and deserve.

To sign up for text updates, text WILL to (877) 861-4428.

Sincerely,

Will Lehman

Below you will find links to a number of articles on my campaign from the WSWS. The corporate media is blacking out this campaign because it is terrified of a movement of the rank-and-file. I urge you to read and share these articles as widely as possible:

- “Unless people take a stand, nothing will ever change”: Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia back Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president (August 31)
- UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman concludes historic tour of US auto plants with online meeting (August 28)
- “The union doesn’t exist in the plant”: Powerful support for Will Lehman at Ford Kentucky Truck Plant (August 25)
- As teachers continue strike in Columbus, Ohio, UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman visits picket lines (August 24)
- “Everything has gotten worse since the UAW sold out the GM strike”: UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman speaks to workers in Flint, Michigan (August 23)
- “We need to get back to our roots”: Growing rank-and-file support for Will Lehman’s campaign for UAW president (August 22)

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Get involved with the rank-and-file campaign in the UAW elections.

willforuawpresident.org/get-involved