

US autoworkers discuss class issues behind Trump's attack on immigrants

Our reporters
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On Sunday, workers from the Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee hosted a meeting with workers from auto and other industries in Indiana, Michigan and Pennsylvania to discuss the fight to defend jobs and the attacks against the working class being planned by the Trump administration. The committee was formed in the aftermath of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy's sellout of the 2023 contract battle in order to fight the wave of mass firings and layoffs in Kokomo, Indiana, a major center of Stellantis transmission production.

The meeting, which was held on the eve of the presidential inauguration, was specifically called to discuss Trump's campaign against immigrant workers. The fascist president has scapegoated immigrants for virtually every social ill in society, from unemployment, high housing costs and overcrowded classrooms to crime and drug addiction, and claims mass deportations would be a boon for native-born workers.

On Monday, Trump signed a bevy of executive orders to halt immigration on the Southern border, prepare mass detention of immigrants without criminal records and deploy the US military domestically. He also moved to overturn constitutionally protected birthright citizenship, setting the precedent for the US president to strip anyone who opposes government policies of their citizenship rights. This was followed Tuesday, by the first of a wave of workplace raids by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents.

Leading the discussion was Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker from Pennsylvania who ran as a socialist candidate for UAW president in 2022. While UAW President Fain pledged to work with Trump in an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*, Lehman is fighting to unite all workers, native-born and immigrant, in the US and internationally, through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Eric London, a writer from the *World Socialist Web Site*, asked workers to express their views on the "efforts to pretend that immigrants are the real enemy of working people, when it's the corporations, American or not, responsible for job cuts and layoffs. It's important to discuss this divide-and-conquer strategy," he said.

A member of the Stellantis Kokomo Rank-and-File Committee responded, "One thing about the whole immigration

thing, instead of building a wall or opening the borders like a floodgate, so refugees come across the border illegally, just make it easier for immigrants to come here legally. Get rid of that damn wall and make it easier for people to come. That would settle the immigration problem, period."

Describing conditions in his factory, the worker added, "Starting this coming week, they cut the numbers down on the second shift again. So now, they're expecting us to work twice as hard for second shift employees to get the same number of transmissions out."

Lehman responded, "We discussed this in a previous meeting, approaching everything that we're looking at, all these attacks, as a matter of class attacks. The attack on immigrants is aimed at trying to divide workers up. The whole platform of the IWA-RFC is developed because the unions can't effectively fight in one country alone, in any of these countries."

He criticized the corporatist role of union bureaucracy internationally, from the UAW and Teamsters in the US to the sellout of VW workers by IG Metall in Germany, noting that they assist the global corporations in pitting workers against each other in a fight to see who will work for the lowest wages and worst conditions. "We're all wage laborers. It doesn't really matter what company we're working for. Attacks that are carried out in one sector effectively erode our power everywhere."

An auto parts worker in Pennsylvania influenced by Trump's anti-immigrant agitation said, "As far as the immigrant thing goes, this is a real problem. We don't know who we're letting in. We could be letting in people that just want to down this country, you know, cause chaos and who are criminals. You wouldn't leave your door unlocked and let anybody in your house. Why let anybody in the country?"

"The people in charge are doing this on purpose and hiring these people at a quarter of the cost of an American or a person here. They're getting in the workforce, cutting our wages, which is turning us against them. I've worked with people who crossed the border, and some of them are still illegal, and 99.9 percent of them are great people. I've worked side by side with them and have respect for them. But on the other hand, there are these others who jump from state to state and are causing

nothing but problems. You can't just leave the floodgate open."

London responded to the worker. "You said you lock your door when you leave your house. As a statistical matter, immigrants tend to commit fewer crimes. There are, of course, a lot of American citizens who commit crimes too. But let's take that analogy about locking the door and turn it around a little bit. If we're talking about the working class's house, over the last 50 years, the corporations have been breaking into the house and taking everything that you own, whether it's pensions, wages, the social programs that used to exist 30 or 40 years ago, your democratic rights, free speech.

"You know, they come into your house. They set up listening devices on your cell phone. They're listening to what you're saying. Then they're in your house, rummaging through your family jewels, and they point out the window at another working class person who just happens to be from a different country, and they say that guy's going to rob you. I mean, if you think about it in a historical standpoint, that's really what's happening. And as you pointed out, when the corporations wanted cheap labor, they facilitate people coming in."

London continued, "The working class is international. It's an accident where you're born. We don't get any say in it. If you were born in El Salvador or Mexico or Honduras, you'd probably want to come to the United States too. And it's hard to get to the United States legally. You've got to pay thousands of dollars and wait 20-30 years for the legal process to play out. So, if there's a gang that's trying to kidnap or kill you, your choice is to wait 20-30 years or cross the border."

He concluded, "You really have to pay attention to where this talk of blaming immigrants is coming from. If you follow the money, you know, it always comes from the very top. From the standpoint of fighting transnational corporations, it's important that we pay attention to the people who are actually in the house robbing us blind. That's the American ruling class. That's the corporations, the CEOs, the rich, Biden, Trump, the UAW bureaucracy."

Jerry White, labor editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, pointed to the experiences from American history, including the early struggles of the labor and socialist movement. During the Civil War, White said, the pro-slavery Democratic Party sought to exploit the economic fears of Irish workers, many of whom had barely survived the Potato Famine in Ireland, by claiming if slaves were freed, they would take their jobs. But hundreds of thousands of Union soldiers gave their lives to defeat the Confederacy because they came to understand that white laborers could never end their own oppression if blacks remained in bondage."

During the 1936-37 Sit-Down Strike against General Motors, White said, socialist-minded workers in Flint, Michigan, and Anderson, Indiana, had to fight against the Black Legion, an offshoot of the KKK hired by GM to divide native-born and

immigrant workers against each other. "To fight this, the early union organizers, many of whom were socialists, would put out their flyers in more than a dozen languages to unite the working class.

"Right now, the share of the nation's income that goes to the working class is the lowest in history. The oligarchs—the Jeff Bezoses, the Elon Musks—they have increased their control of the wealth that you create, the working class creates. So, isn't it convenient that they have us fighting each other over this so-called scarcity that exists, when they're monopolizing everything?"

The Kokomo worker stated, "What you said took the words out of my mouth. I grew up in a traditional Irish American family. It happened to the Irish; it happened to Native Americans, who were the original owners of this land. It basically happened to every race. So yeah, they are the ones to blame, and they are the ones who control this because they're all the ones that have all the money. If you really want to hurt them, okay, you need to hurt them where it counts, and that is their money, and that's with them all, including the politicians."

A healthcare worker from Michigan added, "My grandfather came over in 1918 from the Polish side of Germany. My family on the Irish side came a little sooner, probably the 1880s. If anybody knows about indentured servitude, the Irish were really treated crappy. It was like a form of legal slavery. A lot of American-born people are paid just as crappy as somebody that comes over the border, if they work in the same place with you."

A Ford worker from Michigan added, "I was born in Canada. When I applied for financial aid to go to college, I was told I was a foreign student. It took me two years and was very difficult. I never lived in Canada. It is very difficult."

A young worker from western Michigan said, "This is my first meeting like this. I agree with a lot of things I'm hearing. I think that the attacks on immigrants are a distraction. On the whole, immigrants actually lower our crime rate. They pay taxes, and they don't get services back. I see the real enemy of the working class being like these transnational corporations and elites, and it is really important to unify to fight. I don't think we're going to make any progress without overcoming these divisions that they created to distract us from the real problem."



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