

Defying unions, Daimler Trucks strikers oppose years of wage givebacks

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Over 600 machinists and painters who build heavy-duty Western Star trucks in the Portland, Oregon area have entered the second week of their strike against Daimler Trucks North West (DTNW). Union officials of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) were set to meet with the company Monday to schedule further negotiations.

Workers in the two unions voted June 30 to reject the company's offer of an increase of \$1.30 per hour over the length of a three-year contract. In doing so, they rejected the unions' recommendation to accept the deal. After years of givebacks imposed by the unions, workers are determined to fight, with many wearing t-shirts in the weeks leading up to the contract negotiations with "The concession stand is closed" emblazoned on the front.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) pushed through a similar deal on 170 other workers at the factories. The plants have been idled since the beginning of the strike.

A prior strike authorization meeting on May 4 revealed the determination of the truck workers to regain the concessions forced on them over the last eleven years, voting by 100 percent to walk out. In 2002, DTNW threatened to close its Swan Island facilities in North Portland unless workers gave up significant concessions. Nearly a ten percent wage cut was imposed, contractual wage increases were waived and bonuses eliminated.

The IAM joined the blackmail, with officials telling workers to either accept the givebacks or join the unemployment lines. Since then the unions have sabotaged any serious struggle against DTNW. The 2007 contract imposed a wage freeze for the three years of its life after a two-day strike, which was isolated and sold out. The 2010 contract accepted mandatory overtime and incorporated provisions to enhance scheduling flexibility,

cut costs and improve efficiency.

This has allowed Daimler to slash labor costs and increase productivity by 25 percent. "You go as hard as you can, but if you use the bathroom you can't catch up," veteran worker Guy Berry told the WSW.

While workers on the picket line are seeking to break the isolation of their struggle imposed by the unions, German trade union IG Metall leader Erich Klemm—who sits on Daimler's supervisory board—sent a duplicitous letter of "support" to striking workers. Earlier this year, IG Metall signed a deal with Daimler that sanctioned the use of hundreds of low-wage temporary contract workers with no protections. (See "German unions agree on engineering industry contract").

Dan Kilpatrick told the WSW, "I've been here 40 years and in fact the average age is 40 years. In 2002 we made concessions and they said they would never forget our sacrifices. In 1981, I made \$12.31 an hour. Now I make less than \$25 an hour. In the last 32 years wages have not even doubled. We know we make [Daimler] millions. We are in a critical status with the pension funding right now. The pension has gone from green to red and the company is using that to demand that we pay more into it."

Dave agreed, "We've barely seen a double in wage increase in 32 years. The company has refused to make their profits public knowledge."

Cindy added, "This company is making billions of dollars but there has been a freeze on wage increases for four years."

Bryan, with 30 years at the plant, said, "What we're asking is nothing for them. We just need enough to live on. The company executives are driving around in brand new Mercedes, getting their raises and bonuses. What about us? It seems the unions are going backward. Dues were \$20 a month 30 years ago, now they are \$70 a month."

John said, “We haven’t seen a true wage increase in 13 years, just a constant takeaway. We work harder for less. There’s no respect.”

Guy Berry added, “I build trucks. I have been here 30 years and the work environment has completely changed. Your input was appreciated once, now they just want us to shut up. We have people who make extraordinary efforts. We get stuff done and they still demand more.” Speaking of the union, he said, “Most of us feel our union is bought off. It takes forever to get a grievance.”

The IAM is following the same pattern as it did in the sellout of the 15-week strike by workers at the Caterpillar plant in Joliet, Illinois last year, when it isolated their struggle, wore workers down with starvation-level strike pay and collaborated with Democratic Party politicians to push through deep concessions, even as the heavy equipment giant was making record profits. Lauded by the *Wall Street Journal*, the final contract was virtually the same as the one originally rejected by the rank and file. Over the six-year-life of the contract, workers wages will fall by 20 percent with cuts in pension and health care benefits. (See “Betrayal at Caterpillar”.)

Aiding the IAM in the isolation of the strike is the United Auto Workers (UAW), which organizes the Daimler Freightliner truck plants in North Carolina. Despite the expiration of the contract in May, the UAW has not called a strike, instead extending the contract. In 2007, the UAW International—which had signed a sweetheart deal with the company in order to gain union recognition—collaborated with Daimler to victimize several local union officials for calling an unauthorized strike at the Cleveland, North Carolina factory.

Behind these betrayals is the long degeneration of the trade unions under the impact of the globalization of capitalist production. Rooted in economic nationalism and the defense of the profit system, the unions long ago abandoned any struggle against the corporations, instead adopting labor-management partnership to make their ‘own’ capitalist owners more profitable. Today, they function as cheap-labor contractors seeking to attract the investment of multinational corporations with promises of low pay and the suppression of any resistance by workers.

This is fully in line with President Obama’s economic strategy of ‘in-sourcing,’ which is aimed at convincing companies that they do not have to move production to China or Mexico because they can get cheap labor in the US too. The upper-middle class executives who run the unions have a direct financial stake in lowering wages because this helps boost the number of workers who pay

union dues. While rank-and-file workers’ living standards have fallen, that of the union hierarchy has climbed. The IAM controls assets of \$147 million and paid its president Robert Buffenbarger \$284,975 in 2010. More than 30 other IAM officers and employees were paid in excess of \$200,000 in salary and benefits.

As one worker on the Daimler picket line told a WSWs reporter, “I tend to agree that the union is a dues gathering machine. I think the way things are trending we are never going back.”

Daimler workers are taking a stand for the whole working class. Even as the stock market and corporate profits soar and the Obama administration crows about an “economic recovery,” the corporate and financial elite is refusing to part with any of the vast fortunes accumulated from decades of attacks on the working class. Since the financial crash of 2008, the multi-trillion dollar bank bailout and the deep concessions imposed by Obama on auto workers, a “new normal” has emerged in which employers in the US and internationally are demanding a savage and permanent reduction in the living standards of workers.

If the Daimler workers are to prevail against this corporate and political conspiracy, they must take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the IAM and other unions and organize rank-and-file committees to fight for the extension of the strike throughout the truck industry and beyond. Such an initiative must be bound up with the building of a new leadership of the working class, committed to the international unity of all workers, a break with both big business parties and the socialist reorganization of economic and political life to meet human needs, not private profit.



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