

Portland, Oregon strikers defy concessions demands by Daimler Trucks

Hector Cordon
15 July 2013

Portland, Oregon-based Daimler Trucks North America (DTNW) is pressing ahead with its demands for sweeping givebacks as negotiators for DTNW and the unions are set to resume talks this week. Negotiators met last Wednesday for the first time since workers defied the recommendations of union bargainers and overwhelmingly rejected the company's concessions-laden offer on June 29. According to the web site of the International Association of Machinists Local 1005, "the company expressed no desire to improve the last offer to us."

Nearly 600 machinists and painters—members of a second union, International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) Local 1094—have been out on strike against DTNA since July 1. Workers rejected the company's "last, best and final" offer, which included a miserly \$1.30 per hour increase over three years that would be more than consumed by higher out-of-pocket health plan costs demanded by the company. Daimler's proposals would also decimate what remains of retiree health benefits and impose a punitive absenteeism policy.

DTNA is the largest truck builder in North America, with six plants in North and South Carolina and Oregon and two in Mexico. The Freightliner line of trucks, formerly built in Portland, is now built in North Carolina and in Mexico. German-based Daimler AG, the largest manufacturer of commercial vehicles in the world, owns DTNA. Currently, workers at the company's North Carolina plant—who are members of the United Auto Workers—are being forced by the UAW to work without a contract.

The Portland plant, located in the Swan Island Industrial Park, manufactures the Western Star heavy-duty trucks used in construction, mining, logging and other heavy industries. Many are built to individual

specifications for the customer.

Since 2002, Daimler has, with the complicity of the unions, imposed concession after concession. Mandatory overtime, flexible scheduling and cost cutting have boosted productivity 25 percent under the last contract. Meanwhile, wages have been frozen over the last four years.

Similar conditions exist for Daimler's world workforce, whether in Mexico, Germany or the United States. In Germany, the IG Metall union sanctioned the employment of hundreds of low-paid temporary workers in the last contract. This is what has allowed Daimler AG to extract huge profits.

Strikers on the picket lines discussed the issues in the struggle with the *World Socialist Web Site*. Troy Frahm told the WSWS, "The unions have lost so much in membership and in dealing with how businesses handle themselves. It seems to me the goal of the global economy is to push the worker down."

Sounding a theme that was repeated by many picketers Troy said, "Money is the core of the strike but also respect. We are being bullied and beaten by the company. We are tired of going back. But we build good trucks, I have great pride in my job, I love my job."

Art stated, "You're not being appreciated, even though we have meetings with management who say we are 'family.' There are safety issues but they refuse to do anything that would slow down the line. They won't do anything until someone is hurt or killed."

Jeff added, "The medium age here is 48-49 years. Our numbers are 26 trucks a shift, but then management asks 'can you get 28 today.' Lean production is used worldwide; their stated goal here is to increase productivity by 20 percent. I have spoken to them until I am blue in the face. We are not Toyota.

Every truck is individually built—this one needs an air horn, that one is four-wheel drive. We are not building identical Corollas.”

Asked about the union’s role, Jeff said, “According to the union it’s unfair labor practice to picket in front of corporate headquarters.”

The WSWS also spoke with picketers at a second DTNA plant. Eugene, with 28 years at Daimler, said, “We are not asking for the world. We gave them a \$2.00 an hour cut in pay, and we took a wage freeze. Corporate gets bonuses; we were the only ones to take cuts. They’ve ‘leaned’ us down so much we are now at 50 percent of previous manpower per truck. Western Star trucks are harder to build. Bottom line: we are 25 percent more efficient and Daimler is getting record profits.”

Gary spoke about increased productivity under the lean production system. “I build cabinets and they are videoing you. They will move a whole area around to get you to work more. It’s called ‘7 ways,’ to make you work every second. My problem is the way they treat you.”

Ron, referring to the role of corporate takeover specialists and asset strippers, said, “The big companies buy smaller ones and load them up with debt and then hack up the company. It worked for the financiers—making millions. It’s scary the way things are going.”

Daimler workers are determined to stop and reverse the concessions. However, they are confronting not only a single intransigent multi-national corporation, but an entire economic and political system. Around the world capitalism is stripping workers of the most elemental rights in order to channel even greater profits to the richest segment of society. The trade unions—which defend the profit system and are rooted in economic nationalism—have no answer to the globally coordinated attack on the working class. In order to defend the dues base and income of the union executives, they are collaborating with the corporations and the Obama administration to implement a drastic and permanent reduction in the living standards of workers in the US. In this way, the unions hope to persuade corporations to get their cheap labor in the US rather than Mexico, China or other low-wage countries.

The IAM has kept the DTNA strikers isolated and blocked any struggle to expand the struggle throughout

the trucking industry. The IAM is repeating the same treacherous policy it did during the 15-week strike at the Caterpillar plant in Joliet, Illinois last year. Despite the self-sacrifice of workers, the IAM collaborated with Democratic Party politicians to promote American-first nationalism, isolate strikers from other CAT workers and force them to accept deep concessions even as Caterpillar was piling up huge profits.

The ability of DTNA to implement the wage cuts, freezes, productivity increases and other concessions over the last 11 years has hinged on the labor-management “partnership” carried out by the unions at the expense of workers. Well aware of this, Daimler is more than willing to wait on the unions to wear down the strikers and push through another sellout agreement.

A new road must be taken. If this battle is not to be defeated rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the negotiations and struggle out of the hands of the IAM and other unions through the election of a rank-and-file strike committee made up of the most trusted and militant workers. If the committee itself is to represent the interests of the workers it must operate entirely independently of the unions and fight for the maximum support of workers throughout the Portland area and fight for the expansion of the struggle throughout every Daimler and truck manufacturing plant. This means encouraging a rebellion by workers against the UAW and other unions, and fighting for the fullest industrial mobilization of the working class.

Such a struggle, which would generate widespread popular support among workers in the US and internationally, requires a political break with the pro-capitalist and nationalist outlook promoted by the unions and the Democratic Party. Above all, a new leadership of the working class must be built based on the fight for the international unity of the working class and the socialist transformation of society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact