

“Workers are going to need to stand up against this”

Deere workers denounce sellout contract

Our reporters
5 October 2015

Over 11,000 workers for the agricultural equipment giant John Deere were forced to vote on a six-year contract proposal Sunday after receiving a mere dozen or so pages of “highlights” hours before from the United Auto Workers (UAW).

Sunday evening, the UAW announced that the contract passed, without providing any details of the vote count or the contract itself. (See, “UAW claims John Deere contract ratified despite widespread opposition”)

Campaigners from the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter spoke with Deere workers in Cedar Falls, Iowa and East Moline, Illinois. They passed out a leaflet demanding the full disclosure of the UAW-company deal and for workers to be given enough time to study any proposal before voting on it.

Cedar Falls, Iowa

Workers lined up for over an hour and a half outside of McLeod Center at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. Before the meeting, campaigners distributed nearly a thousand leaflets containing the statement, “Reject UAW effort to ram through sellout deal!” to Deere workers who received them warmly.

Some 2,000 Deere workers are members of UAW Local 838 in the Waterloo-Cedar Falls area. Workers were keenly interested in the call for workers to follow the example set by Fiat Chrysler workers who forced the UAW to release the entire contract, not just “highlights” before voting.

“Hey, I’m with you guys,” one worker told campaigners. “I’ve felt for a long time that the UAW does not represent our interests. I’ve said this before. Of course we should be shown the full contract. But the UAW has always rammed through whatever contract they bring back to us. And that is what they are going to do here today.”

Another worker with over 30 years told the WSWS, “I just read your Autoworker Newsletter two weeks ago for the first

time. When our union president announced to the media that this was a good contract, I was relieved. I talked to a steward, and he told me that from what he knew it was a good contract.

“But when I see that Norwood Jewell, the same guy that sold out the Fiat Chrysler workers, was our negotiator with Deere, I am beginning to wonder. To go into a meeting and vote on a contract we have not seen doesn’t seem right. The devil is in the details. And if it’s anything like the Fiat Chrysler contract, I can’t support it.”

Workers expressed frustration over having to review and vote on the contract at the same meeting. One worker reported that a union committeeman said the company gave the UAW until October 5 to get the contract ratified.

After the meeting, a worker who had been laid off told the WSWS, “I voted ‘no’ because it seemed like that was what most wanted. The ratification bonus was not tempting enough for me to support the contract. Usually they give you a little bonus so they can screw you more later.”

About the UAW’s continued policy of stratifying workers under the hated two-tier wage system, he said, “There shouldn’t be divisions because that defeats the purpose of the union.” As to how to overcome these divisions, the worker agreed with the Autoworker Newsletter’s call for the unification of the struggles of Deere workers with all autoworkers, steelworkers and teachers. “I think that’s the only thing that will get anything done. That’s what it should be.”

Another veteran worker coming out of the meeting said, “There is so much red tape and bureaucracy in our union, you wouldn’t believe it. At the meeting, the most vocal people speaking up were those against the contract. They wanted more equality in the union. They want an end to two tiers. They wanted the younger guys treated the same as the older guys. I think the majority of people are against it. What I’m not sure is if they voted against it.”

Another worker leaving the meeting said, “I don’t think it’s a good deal. There was a lot of complaining in the meeting. But it was hard to hear. The way they had it set up,

there was an echo that made it really difficult to hear what anyone was saying.

“From what I understand, the copay will be going up. To start with, it will increase from \$15 to \$25, then another \$25 to \$40 in 2019. They did away with the COLA. We’re only going to get a 50-cent increase. The highest paid people are basically only getting a 1.25 percent increase. Inflation is going to be a lot more than that.

“The UAW leaders don’t seem to be worried about us. What I think the UAW leaders are worried about is losing membership and the union dues they use for their big office in Detroit. Last year, we went from paying 2 hours of wages a month in union dues to 2 and a half hours.

“I feel like the officials of our union were sold something by the president of Deere. Our local president said this was an agreement we could be proud of. I’m not so sure.

“One thing I will say, I agree with you guys about combining together all workers—autoworkers, steelworkers and teachers—to fight this. My daughter is a teacher. Workers are going to need to stand up against this.”

East Moline, Illinois

Over a thousand workers lined up for the ratification vote at United Township High School in East Moline, Illinois Sunday morning. Neighboring Moline is the location of the world headquarters of John Deere & Co.

Although the UAW scheduled the meeting to begin at 9 a.m., by 9:45 hundreds of workers were still waiting in the cold to get in.

The mood going into the vote was tense and wary. Many Deere workers expressed concern over what they would face and said they had followed the massive “no” vote among Fiat Chrysler workers.

One worker rejected Deere’s arguments that “market forces” precluded any significant improvements for workers, saying, “Deere is still making what would have been record profits seven or eight years ago. It’s our time to ask for more.”

Another worker said about the UAW bureaucracy, “I’ve never liked Dennis Williams or Norwood Jewell. I don’t trust they will bring us what’s best for us.”

One worker commented about the last contract vote, “Six years ago when we were here, there was some info they didn’t give us. We found out later it was in the contract and all we had were ‘highlights.’”

Union officials accosted WSWS reporters at one point, seeking to prevent them from talking to and distributing any

information to workers. When questioned why workers were not being given time to study the contract proposal in detail, one union rep cynically declared, “They’ll have time.” The majority of workers continued to take WSWS statements despite the attempts at intimidation by the union.

A number of workers contacted the WSWS during and after the ratification votes, angrily denouncing the sellout. One worker wrote, “As far as the 3,000 person private [UAW local] Facebook group goes... It sounds like most people are saying hell no!”

One laid-off worker spoke with the WSWS at length, stating, “The morale was quite grim this afternoon, didn’t hear any positives coming from the membership in Moline.

“Some might say [about the contract], at least this or at least that. But we work for a company that made billions upon billions over the last contract. Why should we give anything?”

“In the meeting, on the local’s Facebook page, by far the majority is a ‘no’ as of right now. As far as I’m concerned, Facebook is a good tool for us and employees to communicate with each other.

“I started following you guys by reading about the FCA-Chrysler workers and the ‘no’ vote. I think your reports are very informative. And you provide unbiased opinion. You are not pro-company. You are for us working men and women.

“It blows my mind to see the income inequality in this country. Your average Joe makes \$50,000 a year at best. And the guy at top makes \$50 million. I believe the political system is rigged in favor of money.

“John Deere alone over the life of the last contract made some \$6.5 billion two years ago and \$3 billion last year. This year they are still going to make over \$1.5 billion in profits. And then they tell us, ‘You have to take concessions now that we’re in a bad farm economy.’ What happened to the six years of record profits?”

“There’s a lot of pissed off people at the moment!”



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