

“If you don’t put a stop to it now, it will never stop”

Kohler strike in fourth week

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Talks continued this week as the strike by 2,100 Kohler workers in Wisconsin nears the completion of its fourth week. Members of United Auto Workers Local 833 walked out November 15 against company proposals that would have maintained the hated two-tier wage system.

Lower-paid Tier-B workers currently earn an average of \$12.70 an hour with some making as little as \$11.50. Management’s final proposal would have boosted Tier-B wages an average 20 percent, while giving senior workers raises averaging two percent annually. Management is also seeking to impose an inferior health care plan, partially offsetting increased costs with paltry one-time bonuses of \$1,200 to senior workers and \$1,000 for Tier-B workers.

Under the UAW’s final contract offer, rejected by Kohler, Tier-B workers would gradually rise to the level of Tier-A workers over a five-year period, although the term of the proposed agreement is just three years.

In response to Kohler’s offer, workers turned in a powerful 94 percent strike authorization vote. The day of the walkout more than 2,000 striking workers and supporters staged a march and mass picket, briefly blocking traffic in and out of the plant.

A veteran Kohler worker told the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*, “They are just not being fair to Tier-B workers. They are the future generation. If you don’t put a stop to it now, it will never stop.

“Some are making as little as \$11.50 an hour depending on their location. They have to pay for insurance. At the end they have very little left to live on. It doesn’t add up whatsoever.”

Asked what she saw as the main issues, she said, “We want a fair raise for Tier-B workers so they get up to the level of senior workers. When you are standing next

to a person doing the same job you should have the same opportunity.

“We are not asking for the world, just a fair contract.

“Right now the tier-A average is \$23-24, but it varies according to location. Every building is different. Our average age is 28-30 years seniority, so they would like all the Tier-A to retire so everyone will be making Tier-B pay.”

Based in Kohler, Wisconsin outside Sheboygan, the company is a multibillion-dollar privately held firm that is best known for the manufacture of kitchen and bathroom fixtures. It operates globally and owns a real estate company that oversees golf courses, restaurants, private clubs and other enterprises. The Kohler family is intimately bound up with the Wisconsin political establishment, with two Kohler family members serving at various times as governor.

Kohler has a long and violent history of resisting workers’ struggles going back to the use of goons and strikebreakers in the 1930s. In 1954, the UAW launched what turned out to be the longest strike on record in the US: nine years. It ended in a serious defeat, with Kohler imposing a long list of concessions.

Kohler is attempting to maintain production during the strike using office employees and nonstriking personnel. A court injunction limiting picketing has been issued by a Sheboygan County circuit court judge and is being enforced by the UAW.

As it has in countless other struggles, the UAW is attempting to isolate the current strike from the tens of thousands of workers in the auto industry, who recently were saddled with sellout agreements that maintain the two-tier wage. While the UAW recently raised dues to replenish its one-half billion-dollar strike fund, Kohler workers are being made to subsist on \$200 weekly strike checks and some food donations.

The Kohler worker said that she and coworkers had been surprised that the UAW had ordered striking Nexteer workers in Saginaw, Michigan back to their jobs earlier this week without first voting to ratify a new contract. “We were wondering about that. What is it with the International?”

The issue in the Nexteer walkout was the same as at Kohler: management’s insistence on maintaining a two-tier pay scale. After a stunning 97.5 percent contract rejection vote, the UAW called the strike for workers to let off steam but quickly called it off in order to ensure that production continued uninterrupted at the major Detroit auto companies.

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The 2015 Kohler walkout follows the massive concessions accepted by the UAW in 2010 in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. The contract established the two-tier pay scale and froze wages for senior workers. It also imposed higher health care costs including increased premiums and deductibles.

The Kohler worker said, “We took concessions five years ago. Since then Kohler’s profits have gone up.

“If you look at the Forbes rich list, [Herbert] Kohler [Jr.] has gone up to over \$7 billion in net worth, yet he wants to pay people nothing.

“The support in the community for our strike is unbelievable. They will drop checks of \$250 and more in our strike fund. People are up in arms about the fact that Kohler wants to put in a third golf course in Sheboygan County. He is building and building, but doesn’t want to take care of his workers.”

Kohler workers should be on guard against any attempt by the UAW to ram through a sellout agreement in the shadow of the Christmas holidays. They should insist on an immediate rise of Tier-B workers to Tier-A level and a substantial wage increase for all workers as well as the restoration of cost-of-living raises.

The World Socialist Web Site *Autoworkers Newsletter* urges Kohler workers to carefully consider the recent experience of workers at Ford, General Motors and Chrysler. The UAW sabotaged resistance to a continuation of the two-tier wage system, using threats and intimidation, with allegations of outright vote rigging, to ensure the ratification of sellout agreements.

There is no way forward for autoworkers within the framework of the UAW. We encourage Kohler workers to initiate new forms of democratic rank and file-based organizations independent of the UAW to mobilize the widest possible support for their struggle.



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