

UAW shuts down Kohler strike, rams through contract in snap vote

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The United Auto Workers announced Wednesday evening that Kohler workers in Wisconsin had voted to ratify a new contract, ending a month long strike, with production set to resume today. The UAW claimed a 91 percent margin for ratification out of the 1,847 who voted.

Following the announcement of a tentative contract agreement Tuesday, UAW Local 833 ended picketing and called a snap ratification vote. While at the time of this writing few details are available, pronouncements by the UAW and the company make clear that the deal will lead to a further erosion of wages and working conditions.

In its last public proposal to Kohler, the UAW conceded the continuation of the two-tier system. Instead of abolishing the tiers, it called for an immediate raise in the pay of tier-two workers to 80 percent of regular wages, reaching 100 percent after five years. It also called for \$0.63 an hour annual wage increases for senior workers, a token amount that will not even cover rises in the cost of living.

A statement by UAW Local 833 said that the new agreement “reduced the potential” for out-of-pocket health care costs, a weasel-worded statement that one could drive a truck through.

Kohler workers saw the proposed contract for the first time at a meeting Wednesday evening held at a local high school. Workers were expected to base their decision to ratify the four-year agreement on a quick reading facing the pressure of the approaching Christmas holiday. This is under conditions where workers were being strung out by the UAW on \$200 a week strike pay from the UAW’s \$600 million strike fund.

A major issue in the Kohler walkout was the two-tier wage system. Currently Tier B workers earn as little

\$11.50 an hour. Management’s initial final offer raised the Tier B wage on average 20 percent while imposing an inferior health care plan. Senior workers were to get 50 cents an hour annual wages rises.

The announcement of the contract settlement came at a joint news conference called by Kohler and UAW Local 833. Kohler President and CEO David Kohler reacted enthusiastically to the agreement declaring, “We are very pleased to reach an agreement that recognizes the contributions of our associates and positions our local, Wisconsin operations to be more competitive in the future.” He continued, “The common ground that we share is more important than any differences we may have—and this agreement reflects that.”

The company had earlier complained that its facility in the Sheboygan, Wisconsin area was the most costly of its 13 US locations and 48 worldwide sites. The struck plants produce bathroom and kitchen fixtures as well as small engines and generators.

Within days of the start of the walkout, the UAW caved in to a court injunction limiting picketing while the company sought to resume production with strikebreakers and office personnel. It maintained the isolation of the strike from the mass of workers in the auto industry.

A veteran Kohler worker told the WSWWS that they were given no information about the new contract before turning up at the ratification meeting. Asked what she looked for in the contract, the worker said, “We need more pay for Tier B workers and for them to have decent health insurance. They are the future generation. It is getting to where it will just be rich and poor.

“You can’t expect Tier B workers to pay hundreds of dollars for their health insurance on an \$11 an hour job.

On top of that you have your deductibles. Then there is life insurance. They want the benefit to be \$27,000 for Tier B workers instead of \$34,000 for the rest of us. What is the difference in the worth of a life between the two? We have to put a stop to it.”

Another issue she said was the hiring of temporary workers. “We have both flex and Tier B workers. They use them and then when they don’t need them they lay them off. If a flex worker is fortunate enough to get a permanent position they become Tier B.”

The imposition of a sellout agreement at Kohler comes at the same time as the UAW is seeking to push through a contract over mass opposition from Nexteer auto parts workers in Saginaw, Michigan. Following a 97.5 percent contract rejection vote, the UAW called a phony 20-hour strike to let off steam. The UAW is now attempting to impose a new sellout deal on Nexteer workers that maintains poverty level wages.

The intervention by the UAW to end the Kohler strike also comes in the wake of the imposition of sellout agreements at the Detroit-based auto companies. Workers were saddled with concessionary agreements that maintain the two-tier wage system, provide insubstantial wage increases below the rate of inflation and expose workers to rising health care costs.

The strike at Kohler was called at a time of the virtual cessation of strike activity in the United States. Prior to the Kohler walkout in November there had been only four strikes involving 1,000 workers or more in 2015, according to tally by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. That number included the strike by oil refinery workers last winter and the ongoing lockout of steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies.

The cessation of strikes does not indicate an unwillingness of workers to fight, but the fact that the UAW and the AFL-CIO as a whole function as corporate policemen and syndicates for the employers, sabotaging and betraying every attempt by workers to organize resistance.



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