

“If you don’t stand up, nothing happens”

Union isolates Chicago-area auto mechanics strike in its fourth week

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22 August 2017

Nearly 2,000 auto mechanics in the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) Auto Mechanics Union Local 701 have entered the fourth week of a strike at auto dealerships in Chicago, Illinois and the surrounding suburbs. The rank-and-file mechanics are fighting for better pay and working conditions, but the union has isolated the striking workers from the wider working class and are seeking to end the strike as quickly as possible by pushing through a concessions contract.

Auto mechanics in the local work under a byzantine piece rate system of pay in which they are paid not by the number of hours that they work on the clock, but by the hourly rate of labor that the auto manufacturer assigns to each part—which decreases year after year.

Carmello, an apprentice mechanic at a Chicago dealership, spoke to the WSWs about the reasons why he was out on strike: “Over the past eight years, we have more diagnostic steps for vehicles, more documentation that’s required. It all takes more time. And they usually end up cutting down the rates for the part-labor hours. The current minimum is 34 hours for part-labor hours. We are asking for hours paid for hours worked.”

Under the current contract, the mechanics are guaranteed only 34 part-labor hours per week, for which they must labor on the clock for at least 40 hours or more. Under the new contract, the union has proposed a 40-hour part-labor guarantee per week. The proposal would not significantly improve the standard of living for the workers, however, and would leave in place the wages scheme requiring workers to work far beyond the number of hours they are paid for, to the benefit of the auto companies and dealerships

“Most of us work hours more than 40 hours a week,” Carmello noted. “Some of our guys only get paid for an hour for diagnosing when they spend hours for fixing the problem.”

The contract also fails to address the other forms of exploitation that mechanics face, such as low wages, exorbitant out-of-pocket costs for tools, an increase in health insurance costs, and unpaid labor and training.

Christian spoke about the increase of health insurance costs. “For me,” he said, “the additional cost of health insurance too is something I’m opposed to. Who’s to say they won’t keep increasing our costs? Now it’s a \$5 increase, next time it will be hundreds more.”

He also spoke about high out-of-pocket costs mechanics incur for education and tools just to get an extremely low-wage job in the industry. “Some of these guys spend more than \$30-40,000 in education. Many of us are still paying off student loans and tens of thousands of dollars in tools.

“That’s a personal investment just to get into the door. So you have thousands of dollars in debt just to get a job as a Lube Technician entry job for \$9.50 an hour, less than a McDonald’s worker. Sixteen years later you may—if you are lucky—become a journeyman. One guy here has been here for 10 years only as a semi-skilled and it may take him a total of 18 years just to become a journeyman.

“I’d like to see some kind of meaningful progression for younger guys to advance in the apprenticeship program and make sure we also have a 40-hour guarantee.”

In order to stay in the good graces of the auto dealerships, the union has also backed down on the 40-hour week guarantee, the very proposal upon which

the contract rested. On Thursday, the union released the following statement on its web site: “There are several dealers that are being told inaccurate information regarding the Union’s positions. They are being told the Union is steadfast on their 40 hour guarantee proposal. That is inaccurate. Once the dealers contact the Union directly to inquire about this 40 hour stance that they’re being told along with discussing the outstanding terms that remain and what the Union is willing to accept results in their subsequent desire to break from the NCDC [New Car Dealer Committee].”

While workers want to fight for a better standard of living, the IAM has no intention of doing so, as it functions as a tool of corporate management.

Earlier this year, in February, a vote by rank-and-file workers at Boeing’s Commercial Airplanes plant in North Charleston, South Carolina, rejected the recognition of the IAM as a union at the plant. The workers, 74 percent of whom voted against the union, made the decision based on their experiences with the betrayals of the IAM, such as stripping workers of the right to strike, ending company-paid pensions, wage and health care cuts.

In August 2012, Caterpillar workers went on strike in opposition to the pro-corporate contract put forth by the IAM and the company at the Joliet, Illinois plant, which ended when workers approved the contract by a slim majority after a bitter three-and-a-half month strike. The contract forced upon the workers all of the demands of the company that they had voted down three months earlier.

The mechanics of Local 701 can expect their struggle to end in the same way if the strike stays in the hands of the IAM leadership. The union is clearly doing all that it can to push through the contract and end the strike. According to the Local 701 web page, dealerships are using intimidation tactics and police repression to scare workers into crossing the picket line. The union has made no sincere condemnation of these tactics, and has not given the workers any means to protect themselves from such intimidation. In the same post, it reveals, “The Union is earnestly seeking to resolve these open issues and to end the strike and to get our members back to work.”

The local’s Facebook page reveals the financial distress that workers’ families are faced with during the strike. As one worker commented, “I have called the

union and they said they were setting up a GoFundMe account. That isn’t going to be enough for everyone. My husband and I did not have the means to save due to my ongoing medical issues and were not in the union long enough to save much. I’m taking up more hours at work but [there] is so much I can do. Since this is not going anywhere anytime soon, my family needs help.”

Although the local attempts to present itself in a militant light on its Facebook page, what the workers have to say about their struggles paints a much different picture. The union, whose bureaucrats enjoy the wealth generated by union dues and corporate kickbacks, are using the strike to financially weaken the workers so that they will submit to corporate demands and end the struggle. Other unions, like the United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers, have set up GoFundMe pages for workers in financial distress, so as not to cut into the wealth of the bureaucrats and the unions and to suppress mounting opposition from the rank-and-file.

“We’re out here to fight,” one of the workers on the picket line noted. “Like any other revolution, or tide-changing event, it comes from the people when they have had enough and they stand up. If you don’t stand up, nothing happens.”

To win their struggle, the mechanics need to break out of the isolation and stranglehold imposed by IAM and form their own independent rank-and-file committees to advance their demands. Such demands can only be advanced by uniting with the struggles of millions of workers in auto, steel, rail, and other industries, in the US and internationally against the entire capitalist system in an independent struggle for socialism and the liberation of the working class.



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