

“We don’t know what kind of deal they’ve struck with the breakaway dealerships”

IAM isolates striking Chicago car mechanics, seeks separate agreements

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Chicago-area auto mechanics, members of the International Association of Machinists Local 701, have been engaged in a bitter five-week strike against the New Car Dealership Committee (NCDC), which bargains for more than 100 Chicago-area dealerships. Rank-and-file mechanics are striking for better pay and working conditions, more efficient training programs and to beat back the dealership’s demands for givebacks on pension and health care benefits.

The mechanics on the picket lines remain militant in spite of intimidation tactics by the dealerships, but throughout the struggle, the IAM has worked to keep the nearly 2,000 mechanics isolated. It now appears that the union is seeking agreements with individual dealerships to weaken the unity of workers and pressure them to capitulate to management’s terms.

NCDC has accused the IAM of illegally soliciting deals with individual dealerships outside of the multi-employer agreements. On its website, the NCDC condemns the deals, saying it will take legal action against the union to stop the individual deals and “return to the bargaining table and negotiate in good faith to resolve this strike for everyone, not just a select few.”

The union has responded to this on its page by denying solicitations of individual deals. Instead, it claims some dealerships have broken with the NCDC and have asked the union to work something out with them individually to end the strike. On August 31, the union wrote that it defends its right to “selectively picket or not to picket dealers at its discretion” and “many of our members will soon be back working.”

Under what conditions, the union does not say.

Jim, a journeyman at a Hyundai dealership picket in Glenview, just north of Chicago, told the WSW, “We don’t know what kind of deal they have struck with the dealers that have broken away. We’ve heard they got 35 [guaranteed hours] for three years, 36 on the fourth year. A dollar more per hour for base pay. If you book more than 35 hours, you will get a \$1.50 more for base pay.

“I would say we deserve more money,” Jim added. “We should get closer to the trades that are out there. The carpenters, plumbers, get a much higher base rate. Our average base rate right now is about \$32 an hour. We think we should get more than \$40 an hour. We deserve it.”

The IAM does not confirm or deny that strikes have ended at several Chicago area auto dealerships. However, reports in the press have confirmed this and several dealerships have sent emails to their customers informing them the strike has ended at their locations.

Nothing displays more nakedly the anti-worker, pro-corporate character of the IAM. It has isolated the mechanics from each other from the outset of the strike. While many workers remain on the pickets, the union is making side deals behind the workers’ backs to end the struggle. The fact of the matter is that both the NCDC and the union are eager to end the strike and push through a concessions contract in order to keep the dealerships profitable and to prevent the mechanics’ struggle from reaching wider sections of the working class.

The NCDC is demanding that workers maintain the

hated flexible workweek, which denies weekends off; increase health care contributions from \$5 to \$15 per week; and keep the same weekly base pay rate, for only 34 hours of so-called part-labor per week guaranteed. Mechanics are paid not by the amount of hours worked on the clock, but by the hours assigned to each part by the manufacturer.

The manufacturers assign lower and lower rates to each part every year, making it very difficult for the mechanics to break even and afford a decent standard of living without working excruciatingly long hours. Mechanics are responsible for making phone calls to customers and ordering parts, hours for which they are not paid. Neither are they compensated for their training or toolboxes, which can total up to \$100,000 or more for many mechanics.

In a video put out by the IAM on Facebook on August 25, International President Bob Martinez can be heard saying to workers, “The machinists of this union have stood up to send a message to the dealers. That...we deserve what we’re owed and we expect you to pay it.” Martinez’s statements are pure hypocrisy. The same day the video posted, the union announced it offered a compromise to the 40-hour base-rate hourly pay, which it had proposed in the original contract proposal. It reduced this to 37 hours, to be implemented over three years. Now the dealerships are demanding the base rate pay be kept at the current 34.

IAM Local 701 have the closest relations with Democrats like US Senator Dick Durbin and Illinois State Senator Tom Cullerton of Illinois’ 23rd District, who toured Local 701’s Apprenticeship Training Center in Carol Stream, Illinois earlier this year. Despite the union’s claims that Durbin and Cullerton are “friends of labor,” the Democrats are a big business party, which under Obama’s 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler slashed the wages of young auto workers in half.

The majority of workers are nearing a breaking point. After the grace period for health coverage runs out—between 30 and 45 days—striking mechanics will be required to go on COBRA coverage, which can cost up to \$1,200 per month for a family. The union’s only answer to workers who are struggling to pay for health coverage during the strike is to tell them to go on one of the expensive and inadequate Affordable Care Act plans.

One striking mechanic at Bredemann Ford in Glenview, told WSWs reporters that the 40-hour contract could lead to layoffs for workers who failed to meet the 40-hour demand. The union has said on its website it would move those workers back down to a 34-hour contract, in order to ensure that an increase in weekly base-rate pay would only be given to who the dealers deem to be “deserving workers”.

The same mechanic informed the WSWs that in the past, “there used to be solidarity strikes, when the members of other unions would come out to the picket and support you on strike. Now there’s none of that.”

Workers at other pickets at Hyundai and Lincoln dealerships spoke about the conditions they face. Nikko, a young worker at a Lincoln dealership picket, said, “The semi-skilled workers have no future. You stay as a semi-skilled for years and then your base rate barely goes up. It’s still under \$15 an hour. I spend \$50,000 on school and another \$10,000 on tools. There’s no future.”

Another worker, Simon, agreed there was no future for younger workers. “In our field, most young people have to spend a longer time to become a top-pay worker. You could spend less time to become a doctor than to become a journeyman. Who wants to spend 16 years before they become a journeyman?”

“If we have grievances,” Jeff, a worker at the Lincoln dealership said, “the union rep comes out and nothing gets resolved. You end up a target [at the dealership]. They find every way to blame you. If you go further into it to make it a big deal, you get picked off.”

In order to win their fight for better pay and working conditions, the mechanics must break free from the leadership of the pro-corporate IAM and AFL-CIO, and form their own independent rank-and-file committee to put forth their demands. From there they must reach out to their class brothers and sisters in rail, auto, and steel to break the isolation imposed by the unions and fight for the social right for a good-paying and secure job, health care and a decent retirement.



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