

IAM ends Chicago area mechanics strike

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Less than a week after workers defiantly voted down the “last, best and final offer” put forward by the Chicago New Car Dealer Committee (NCDC), the Auto Mechanics Local 701, an affiliate of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), pushed through a deal Sunday which differs little from the car dealers’ ultimatum.

With the IAM making it clear it would not fight for any significant improvements and instead undermining the unity of the 2,000 striking workers by signing “interim” agreements with more than half of the 130 dealers and sending mechanics back to work at these locations, rank-and-file mechanics voted 85 percent to accept the new four-year agreement and return to work. Striking workers also faced significant economic pressure with the cutoff of health care insurance and the IAM’s piddling strike benefits.

At Sunday’s ratification meeting Sam Cicinelli, directing business representative for Local 701, boasted that the new car dealers have “waved the white flag and capitulated to our demands.” The contract includes “a significant wage increase across the board and the mechanics’ No. 1 issue of increasing their base pay two additional hours over the term of the agreement,” the union said in a statement.

Far from running up the white flag, the dealers accepted a slightly modified version of their proposed agreement, which mirrors the offer agreed upon by the more than 70 individual dealerships that broke ranks, according to the union’s press release.

Mechanics are paid by the hours assigned to each part that they work on, rather than by the hours that they actually work on the clock. This byzantine and oppressive scheme, imposed by the large car companies, is retained in the four-year deal. If the new agreement “mirrors” the side deals this means mechanics who are currently only guaranteed 34 hours will see an increase to 35 hours in the second year of

the contract and another increase to 36 hours in the fourth year of the contract. In exchange they will have to pay greater out-of-pocket health care costs in the form of co-pays.

The IAM quickly dropped its original claim to be fighting for a 40-hour contract with lower health care costs. The IAM, which is aligned with the Democratic Party, is completely opposed to mobilizing the popular opposition against wage and benefit cutting among workers in the Chicago area. Striking workers received substantial sympathy from workers in the supposedly comfortable western suburbs of the city, which has seen an increase in hunger, poverty and economic insecurity since the financial crash of 2008.

On Saturday, WSWs reporters spoke to striking mechanics at the Bredemann Ford Dealership in the Chicago suburb of Glenview, Illinois. Andrew, a journeyman, highlighted the chasm of inequality between the owners of the dealerships and the workers. “The owners make millions. They own dealerships, they own banks, they own restaurants--they own everything.”

Mechanics also expressed their opinion on broader issues. “I’m anti-war,” Andrew told reporters, while Eddie, a young worker in the Teamsters union who came out to support the picket, said, “I’m against war too.” He added, “I hate what Trump said this morning about the EPA,” regarding the Trump administration’s plan to strip away climate regulations on the coal industry. Referring to Scott Pruitt, Trump’s anti-climate science nominee, “The head of the EPA is against the EPA. How wrong is that?”

In their battle, the car mechanics confronted not only the dealerships, but the giant car companies and financial institutions that stand behind them. Like workers in every industry, the mechanics are facing unrelenting demands to work longer for less and to pay ever-higher health care costs to relieve the corporations

of their obligations.

The seven-week-long strike by car mechanics was defeated not because of lack of determination by the strikers—who defied company threats, police harassment on the picket lines, and the cut off of health care benefits for their families. They were defeated due to the sabotage of their struggle by the IAM and other area unions, which isolated these embattled workers in order to solidify their relations with the car dealers and the Democratic Party.

This lesson must be learned and new organizations of struggle, independent of the pro-company unions and big business politicians, must be built for the future fights on the horizon.



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