

500 Trane Co. workers strike in La Crosse, Wisconsin

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On Sunday, some 500 workers for the heating and air conditioning maker Trane Co., based in La Crosse, Wisconsin, went on strike over forced overtime, rising health insurance premiums and low wages.

The workers are members of two lodges of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Union (IAM). Lodge 21 is the bargaining agent for approximately 470 production and maintenance workers, and Lodge 1115 represents more than a dozen tool and die makers at Trane's La Crosse plants.

On June 26, 2018, IAM Lodge 21 reported on its Facebook page, "We have continued to work on all non-economic proposals between the shop committee and company and have tentative agreements on a couple of them for Lodge 21 and have reached tentative agreements on all non-economic subjects for Lodge 1115. Lodge 21 is still working on several issues meaningful to the membership."

On Saturday the workers voted down the contract offer worked out between the company and the bargaining committee. Neither lodge's Facebook page provides details of the proposed contract.

The general issues of the strike reflect broader issues affecting the entire working class internationally such as rising healthcare costs, unsafe working conditions and mandatory overtime. Rather than hire more workers, companies force "mandatory overtime" resulting in workers working 10 hour shifts six days a week. The spouse of a welder at the Trane Co. plant commented on Facebook, "He has been working mandatory OT for over a year. He has Sunday off. The pay is crap."

Meanwhile, Mike Lamach, the CEO of Ingersoll, Trane's parent company, reportedly received \$19.4 million in executive compensation in 2015. The firm

employs 30,000 workers worldwide and has manufacturing plants in more than one dozen countries.

A previous strike by Trane employees in 1991 lasted 55 days.

In the 1980s, Trane employed over 4,800 workers making it the largest employer in the La Crosse region. As a result of deindustrialization and the cutting of thousands of jobs they now employ less than 2,000 at the manufacturing facility. Further job cuts occurred when Trane was purchased by international conglomerate Ingersoll-Rand in 2008.

Trane and the rest of the industrial corporations carried out the slashing of thousands with the full assistance of the unions, whose executives act as labor managers to suppress the strivings of rank-and-file workers as they carry out the orders of their corporate bosses.

The IAM is using the strike as a safety valve, allowing workers to let off steam as union executives actively work to reach a new backstabbing agreement with Trane. The last scheduled bargaining meeting took place Monday.

The union's hypocrisy was made clear by District Lodge 66 Directing Business Representative Neil Kamrowski who said, "Our brothers and sisters feel they are overworked, overstressed, and underappreciated. Mandatory overtime has been a plague for the last four years. People can't have a life outside of Trane if they are at work all week. The proposal that failed to ratify had too many negative changes and not enough positive changes to allow a better balance between work and family."

But how did this "plague" come to be? Indeed the deal Kamrowski now denounces was accepted by the IAM. Thus, the union is attempting to rewrite history and to cover up its role in pushing through the

previous strike sellout and now is attempting to do the same all over again.

The strike has gained sympathy from broad layers of workers, with some taking to Facebook to voice their support for better conditions and to warn against the union conspiring to betray the workers by ramming through a sellout contract. A Union Pacific employee commented, “Don’t let the Union sell you out, like the RR (railroad) unions did to us.”

Another worker compared the struggle of Trane workers with that of AT&T workers. “AT&T did the same thing. Millions of dollars in tax breaks, then laid off 1,000s of workers, then the CEO gave himself a raise.”

This struggle must be seen in the context of the growing class struggle, nationally and internationally. The record of the unions in betraying countless struggles points to the need for Trane workers to take the conduct of the strike into their own hands and build independent rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by the workers and completely independent of the unions.

At the same time Trane workers must turn out and fight to connect their struggle with that of the thousands of United Parcel Service workers resisting a sellout contract under the Teamsters and other sections of workers now coming into struggle, including brother Trane workers overseas.



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