

Union shuts down manufacturing workers strike in Wisconsin

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Roughly 200 workers at CG Bretting Manufacturing Co. went on strike Sunday, December 16 in Ashland, Wisconsin. Workers demanded an increase in wages, pension and health benefits that were more substantial than what was offered by the company. Only five days after the strike began, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Local 621 issued a joint one-sentence statement with the company, announcing a new three-year contract agreement without releasing any details to the public.

As with striking teachers throughout the United States and workers engaging in pickets internationally, the Bretting strike is an expression of the deepening class struggle which is emerging throughout the world. The strike took effect just after midnight on Saturday, December 15, 2018 following workers, under Local 621 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW) rejecting the company's contract offer the previous Thursday.

Workers were out on the picket line Monday morning starting at 4:30 a.m. against the company's offer, which included wage increases of 3 percent, 2.75 percent and 2.5 percent in the following three years of the new contract with no change to annual health insurance deductibles through 2021. CG Bretting workers took increases for annual health insurance premiums over the last three years and increases in annual deductibles of \$500 (\$1,500 to \$2,000) for individuals and \$1,000 (\$3,000 to \$4,000) for families in 2016.

CG Bretting originally began operations in 1890, manufacturing equipment and machinery for the sawmill industry. The company presently employs 450 to 500 engineering, manufacturing and assembly workers at its 280,000 square foot facility in Ashland, which customizes industrial machines and equipment

that is used for packaging, folding, winding and conversion of paper into products such as facial and bath tissue, baby wipes and other consumer products.

Workers at the facility design and build between 40 and 50 machines a year, ranging in price from \$1.5 to \$7 million, using a 3D design center and computer-controlled machining shop. According to the company, 90 percent of paper napkins sold and used in the United States are folded on a machine built by Bretting, and 50 percent of its sales are in 40 countries outside North America.

As of Monday December 17, the company has refused to open up any further contract negotiations with the striking workers. CEO David Bretting declined to comment to the *Ashland Daily Press* and company representatives declined to go on camera. Instead, the company issued a self-serving written statement later Monday afternoon, which claimed that the company saw workers as "an invaluable part of our team" while promising "to ensure they remain among the highest-paid production workers in this area with a strong package of benefits, secure jobs and fulfilling careers." Elsewhere, it said "[i]t is hard to understand why the union would choose to begin a job action in the face of a contract offer that would provide substantial increases in wages and would preserve benefits and to do so in the midst of the holiday season."

Striking CG Bretting workers spoke to local reporters about the strike and the company's unwillingness to negotiate with them. "We want fair wages for fair work," said Kyle Thompson, a 22-year employee with the company. "We want to try and do right by our families and get a good contract."

For their part, IAMAW representatives told reporters that union workers were prepared to continue working under terms of a contract that expired Saturday.

After announcing the end of the strike Friday, no details from the union or company have been given about how conditions for negotiations reopened, nor the nature of the new three-year contract, contrasting the two statements circulated by the company.

The IAMAW has a long history of suppressing strikes and pushing through concession contracts against widespread opposition from workers. On April 1, 2012, 43 workers who were members of IAMAW Local 621 union in Ashland, Wisconsin began a strike when Ashland Industries, a producer of construction and farming equipment, demanded newly hired workers fully pay health insurance for their families and imposed right-to-work guidelines akin to those advocated by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker on public employees in 2011.

Over the five weeks of the strike, the union hung its workers out to dry, with the company hiring a dozen replacement workers, and another 10 union workers crossed the picket line. The strike ended with the hiring of replacement workers, the striking workers laid off and the union accepting the right-to-work concession.

In August of this year, over 500 La Crosse Trane workers, members of IAM Lodge 21 and Lodge 1115, went on strike after rejecting a contract that didn't address forced overtime, rising health care costs or stagnant wages. Workers reported being forced to work 60 hours a week with only a single day off. After an isolated three day strike, IAM officials forced through an unchanged contract and workers were back on the job that same week. Neil Kamrowski, directing business representative of IAMAW District 66, tried to put a positive spin on the sellout deal while admitting the grievances workers had struck on had remained unresolved. "Going on strike did not make the (wage) package any different than it was the first time," Kamrowski admitted, while "forced overtime" was changed to "volunteered overtime."

In 2012, nearly 800 Joliet Caterpillar workers struck for three months, seeking to prevent an attack on their living standards. The IAM ended the strike by imposing a concessions contract, which included a 20 percent reduction in real wages, as well as cuts to health care, benefits and pensions. The IAM betrayed a bitter three-and-a-half-month strike by nearly 800 workers at the Joliet plant in 2012, paving the way for its closure, announced by the company in December and would lay

off 285 workers at its Joliet, Illinois, facility between January and June of 2019.

Neither the IAM national leadership nor the IAM Local 851 in Joliet has issued any statement opposing the layoffs or closures. In recent statements, a Caterpillar spokesperson pointed to the ongoing collaboration of the union, noting the IAM had agreed to the extension of the existing contract into next year. "We have reached an agreement with the IAM to extend the current Joliet contract into 2019 to complete the work at the facility so we can meet customer needs."



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