

1,700 workers battle two-tier wages at Erie, Pennsylvania locomotive plant

Samuel Davidson
6 March 2019

Seventeen hundred workers at the giant locomotive plant in Erie, Pennsylvania have entered their second week on the picket line, braving subzero wind-chill temperatures, to fight the company's demands for a two-tier wage system and other givebacks.

The plant, formally GE Transportation, was taken over by Pittsburgh-based Wabtec last week as part of a \$9 billion buyout of General Electric transportation division. GE, which received several billion in cash, will still own a 25 percent stake in Wabtec.

The deal was finalized on Monday, February 25 and Wabtec announced it would not honor the current labor agreement and would instead impose its own "terms and conditions" of work.

Wabtec, following the pattern of concessions granted by the United Auto Workers to General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, is seeking to establish a two-tier pay structure. The company is demanding that all new hires and any of the 450 currently laid off workers who get recalled work for about half what a current worker earns with much fewer benefits.

"We are just trying to retain what we have got," said a picket as he added wood to a fire barrel. "I worked here since 2011 and was laid off in 2016. They want me to take a pay cut. I can't do that."

Workers gathered in groups of 10 or 15 near plant gates and along Franklyn Avenue, the main road outside the plant. They have received strong support from workers and others throughout Erie many of whom have also faced job and pay cuts in the steel and auto industry.

In addition to the two-tier wage system, Wabtec is seeking to transform a quarter of the workforce into temporary workers, who have no rights and can be hired and fired at will.

Wabtec is also cutting the number of job classifications meaning that a worker can be forced to do a job that he or she is not trained for. The company also wants the right to

impose forced overtime on workers.

While cutting the wages, benefits and safety of its workers, Wabtec management will be richly rewarded from the corporate takeover. Wabtec CEO Raymond Betler will receive a \$16 million payoff and 19 other top executives will receive over \$43 million in bonuses when the deal is completed.

The 110-year-old Erie plant has been a mainstay for generations of workers in the area.

"We are not asking for anything more than what we had before," said Jeremy who has worked at the plant for eight years and was using a chainsaw to cut up wood pallets to go into the fire to keep warm.

"It's essentially about safety in that plant and our job security. They are taking a lot of different job classifications, say you are driving a jitney one day, now they are going to make you run a machine you never ran before. There is going to be a lot of people being hurt and we can't allow that kind of stuff.

"Essentially it is about our people's future. I have three little children and I would hate to see that if they wanted to come to work here to have to work for less money. It's about the future.

"This is about corporate greed, they want more. They make record profits every quarter and it doesn't seem like enough. They don't drop the price of a locomotive, but they want to drop our wages to make more money. That is the bottom line of it," Jeremy said.

"I have eight years. We all want to retire out of here, we just want to go in and go to work, but we are not going to take what they are giving here. It doesn't stop here. All the corporations want more.

"My grandfather worked here, and I have a lot of family members who have retired out of here. They have been coming down and supporting us too. We want to retire out of here too. They have been fighting for the last 80 years for what we have now, we are not about to let it go."

Wabtec is based in Wilmerding, a small town outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The company specializes in the production of air brakes for rail cars as well as control systems for trains. In addition to the Erie plant, Wabtec acquires a nearby engine plant in Grove City, Pennsylvania and another locomotive plant in Texas.

The lockout is the largest industrial action in the United States since the lockout of 2,200 steelworkers by specialty steelmaker Allegheny Technologies (ATI) in 2015–16. During that lockout, the United Steelworkers (USW) worked to isolate the workers at ATI from steelworkers at US Steel and Arcelor Mittal whose contracts were expiring at the same. After a year-and-a-half, the USW forced ATI workers to accept massive concessions and the destruction of over 500 jobs.

The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) is following the same pattern as USW and other unions in isolating these struggles and forcing workers to fight powerful corporate and political forces alone. The UE has not called out workers at Wabtec's other plants and is allowing the company to continue making profits.

Over the past year, the struggles of workers in the US and around the world have increasingly taken the form of a rebellion against the unions, which have long collaborated with the corporate and political establishment and colluded in the relentless attacks on workers' jobs and living standards. This has included the revolt of teachers across the US last year, and most recently the maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico who rebelled against their corrupt unions and organized independent strike committees to spread their walkout, which has led to the slowdown of production in several US and Canadian plants.

While isolating the struggle, the UE leaders have promoted Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders as a champion of their struggle. Sanders, who recently announced his bid for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 2020, has attracted support with his denunciations of the "billionaire class" and social inequality. But he is opposed to any struggle by the working class against capitalism. Instead, he promotes the same lie as Trump, blaming wage cuts and layoffs on "unfair trade" and workers in Mexico and China, even though workers in those countries are fighting the same global corporations as American workers.

At the same time, Sanders, who backed Hillary Clinton in 2016, is once again seeking to keep workers tied to the Democratic Party, which is just a much a corporate-

controlled enemy of workers as Trump and the Republicans.

On Saturday, UE Local 506 President Scott Slawson, was one of the first speakers at the Sanders rally in Brooklyn, New York. Far from calling for mass strikes and a struggle against the giant corporations attacking workers, Slawson claimed that corporations and workers had the same interests, but corporate executives just didn't realize it.

"We know what works, with decent pay, solid benefits and strong job protections we make a high-quality locomotive, we turn a good profit for the company," Slawson told the crowd. Pointing out that the union was willing to work under the extended contract while they negotiated concessions, Slawson said "we were looking for peace, they were looking for a fight."

This is thoroughly bankrupt. If the struggle in Erie is not to be isolated and betrayed by the unions, like countless struggles before it, Wabtec workers must take the conduct of the fight into their own hands by electing rank-and-file committees, which fight for the demands that workers need, not what the corporations and the unions say is affordable.

The isolation of the strike must be broken by spreading the industrial action to all Wabtec facilities, by uniting with steelworkers, oil refinery workers, teachers, autoworkers, Amazon, UPS and other sections of workers to prepare a general strike to fight for the social rights of all workers. The nationalism peddled by the unions must be rejected and a fight conducted to unite workers internationally against the capitalist system and to transform the giant corporations, including Wabtec, into public enterprises collectively owned and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

To break the isolation of their struggle, workers cannot trust Sanders and any of the politicians of the two big business parties. The Socialist Equality Party is urging workers to form rank-and-file committees to organize the fight against Wabtec including expanding the strike to all of the company's plants in Western Pennsylvania and throughout the country.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact