

UE orders return to work at Erie, Pennsylvania locomotive plant

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The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) announced an interim 90-day deal Thursday with transportation giant Wabtec at the company's newly-acquired locomotive plant in Erie, Pennsylvania where workers walked out last week. The union told 1,700 striking workers not to report for picket duty and to prepare to return to work Monday.

The deal effectively allows the company to unilaterally tear up the agreement in place before the merger between Wabtec and GE Transportation, the previous owner of the Erie locomotive plant.

Workers at the locomotive plant walked out February 26 after Wabtec imposed the terms of a new contract that included a two-tier wage structure, the ability of management to hire temporary workers, with no rights, for up to 25 percent of the jobs. It also reduced the number of job classifications and instituted forced overtime.

In calling off the strike, or lockout as the UE called it, the union provided only sketchy details of the 90-day agreement. No informational meetings, or vote, on the return to work or terms of the deal have been announced.

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, newly announced candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, has presented himself as a champion of Wabtec workers. UE Local 506 President Scott Slawson from the Wabtec plant spoke at the kickoff rally for Sanders' campaign March 2 in Brooklyn, New York.

Sanders responded to the back-to-work agreement with unrestrained praise for the sellout by the UE. "Their victory is not only a win for the workers at Wabtec, but for workers all around America who are sick and tired of seeing their standard of living decline as a result of corporate greed."

The announcement of the deal posted on the Local

506 website reiterated, in groveling terms, the UE's commitment to continue its policy of corporatist labor-management cooperation. It declared, "Both parties are optimistic that a mutually beneficial collective bargaining agreement can be reached to position the Erie facility for future growth, stability and success."

"Mutually beneficial" indeed. Claims of "victory" aside, there is absolutely no indication that Wabtec has backed down from its draconian concessions demands. Among the provisions of the interim agreement posted on the US Local 506 website was "Voluntary scheduled overtime with the Company's ability to use non-bargaining unit Wabtec employees to meet customer commitments." It also called for a 90-day hiring freeze and a no strike, no lockout clause along with binding arbitration of grievances. There was no mention of the withdrawal of company demands for a two-tier wage system or the mass hiring of temporary employees.

The main impact of the interim agreement is to demobilize workers, who were winning wide support both locally and nationally, and hand the initiative back to the company. Wabtec will use the next 90 days to step up its strikebreaking plans and prepare to renew its offensive against workers with redoubled vigor.

Sanders' role was to facilitate the shutting down of the strike by the UE. He played a similar role in the 2016 strike by Verizon workers, where the Communications Workers of America coordinated the strike closely with the presidential campaign of Sanders. In the end the CWA shut down the strike, accepting the shifting of millions on health care costs onto the backs of active and retired workers.

A fightback against the corporate assault on jobs and living standards cannot succeed based on moralistic appeals to the corporate bosses by politicians like Sanders. The reality is that Sanders, the UE and all the

unions defend the capitalist system and the unquestioned “right” of a handful of billionaires to own and control the giant corporations and grow ever richer by exploiting the labor of the working class.

To oppose the transnational giants requires mobilizing the full strength of the working class nationally and internationally in an uncompromising fight against the profit system. In the case of the Wabtec struggle what is required is an appeal to industrial workers throughout the country, including autoworkers fighting the shutdown of the nearby GM Lordstown, Ohio assembly plant, less than two hours away. Wabtec workers should link their struggle as well to that of teachers, battling school privatization and other attacks on public education across the country.

The battle at Wabtec takes place amidst a growing strike wave internationally. This past week saw the walkout by hundreds of hundreds of thousands of teachers in Argentina, mass protests in Algeria, mass demonstrations by public sector workers in Germany and the continuing struggle by maquiladora workers and teachers in Mexico.

Instead of uniting with these and other sections of workers, the unions tell workers they must unite with their “own” bosses against foreign competition, pitting workers against each other in a fratricidal bidding war to lower wages and conditions. Sanders completely supports this perspective and echoes Trump by blaming “unfair trade” and workers in Mexico and China, not the profit system, for the attacks on workers’ jobs and living standards.

Sanders intervention in the Wabtec strike was based on more than mere electoral calculations. It expresses the fear among sections of the ruling elite that the trade unions, long a pillar of the corporate status quo, are losing control and not able to suppress any longer the massive anger in the working class over decades of concessions.

In the US, this social anger has found initial expression in the wave of teacher strikes, most recently in Oakland, California. The walkout by Wabtec workers is the largest struggle by industrial workers since the lockout of steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies (ATI) in 2015-2016.

The role of Sanders is to cover up the treacherous role of the trade unions and trap workers and young people

within the Democratic Party, a big business party that has presided over the massive growth of social inequality and fostered endless wars. At the same time, Sanders is attempting to divert the growing interest in socialism among workers behind his campaign, which proposes at most a few limited reforms while posing no threat whatsoever to the capitalist profit system.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party advance a genuine socialist perspective. The giant monopolies like Wabtec, GE, the auto companies and telecom companies must be placed under the democratic ownership and control of the working class based on production for human need, not private profit.

Along with this, workers need to develop new, rank-and-file based organizations of struggle in the workplace, independent from the pro-corporate trade unions, linking up the struggles of workers nationally and internationally in a common fight.



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