USW forces rotten deal on Harley-Davidson workers in Wisconsin

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19 April 2019

The United Steelworkers Local 2-209 and USW Local 460, which claim to represent over 1,000 steelworkers at Harley Davidson plants in Menomonee Falls and Tomahawk, Wisconsin, have rejected the membership's demands for an improved contract and instead forced through the same concessions-filled deal workers rejected less than two weeks earlier.

The company and union, working together, ignored workers' principal demands, such as abolishing temporary part time employment and the elimination of speed-up known as the "SURGE" model. The "SURGE" model ramps up production in the plants from January to June, up to 50 percent, by augmenting the workforce with hundreds of temp or "casual workers." This typically leads to temporary layoffs of regular employees in the latter part of the year, sometimes for weeks at time.

Meanwhile the company and union are selling a paltry 14 percent wage increase over five years, after seven years of wage freezes, as a "positive step." Put another way, in 12 years the USW has negotiated a 1.2 percent annual wage increase for its members over two separate contracts. This is below the rate of inflation and represents a significant decrease in workers' pay when combined with increased healthcare costs.

Despite assuring workers that the same contract they rejected earlier this month had been ratified, no vote count or percentage was reported in local media or in the USW press release. The contract is also the same deal that was ratified two weeks ago by approximately 90 workers covered under the contract with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.

The USW peddled lies and half-truths to workers throughout the negotiation process and even on the contents of the contract itself. Union reps said there were "no changes to health care," even though the contract allows the company to review the health care plan on an "annual basis," ensuring that workers will not be able to keep their plan and can expect to be shuffled around or face increased premiums.

Local 2-209 President Mark Eilers proclaimed the success of the contract to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* citing the increased pension benefits for current employees and over $75 million in "enhancements" Harley states it plans to invest in the two Wisconsin plants, supposedly ensuring "job security" for workers. What USW neglects to mention is that new hires "will be excluded from the pension plan," while "enhancements" to the factory do not guarantee job security under capitalism, as seen with elimination of thousands of jobs in upgraded auto plants the world over.

Similar to autoworkers "represented" by the corrupt United Auto Workers at GM, Ford or Fiat-Chrysler plants, Harley Davidson, in concert with the USW, has integrated temporary part-time workers into its factories while cutting full-time employment since the financial crash of 2008. These so-called "temporary" workers can be on the job for years at a time, with one worker cited by the union being employed for over seven years in a temporary status. Temp workers receive reduced wages compared to regular employees, are not privy to the same healthcare benefits and do not get a pension.

With this new contract temporary employment will continue as full-time regular employees are weeded out. The USW has already overseen the elimination of hundreds of jobs at the two plants. The Menomonee Falls plant has seen a nearly 50 percent reduction in its workforce, from 1,250 regular full-time employees in 2010 to 637 regular employees today. Likewise, in the Tomahawk plant the union has overseen a 27 percent

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reduction in workers, from 370 to 270, over that same time period.

The wages for the temporary workers over the life of the contract remain near poverty levels. A temporary worker in the Tomahawk plant can expect to be paid $15.97 an hour in their first year with incremental raises topping out at $17.46 in the fifth year in 2024. In the Milwaukee-area plant, temp workers will start at $17.64 an hour and cap out at $19.28 by the end of the contract. The union or company failed to explain what is “temporary” about a worker employed at the same job for five years. This designation is simply a work-around to extract further surplus value from these workers, with the full backing of the union.

“Equal pay for equal work” is not a relic of bygone era but a central tenet of worker solidarity. The USW and IAM have conspired with the company in stifling wages and benefits for years. The first step in taking the conduct of struggle out of the bureaucratic union reps is forming rank-and-file committees. Workers who are ready to fight back against the unions and their capitalist conspirators are urged to contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* today.

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