

UE union and Wabtec reach wage-cutting deal at Pennsylvania locomotive plant

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8 June 2019

On Thursday afternoon officials representing Westinghouse Air Brake Technologies Corporation (Wabtec) and the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers (UE) reached a tentative agreement for the 1,700 workers at the company's Erie, Pennsylvania locomotive factory. The agreement, which must be ratified by a membership vote Wednesday before going into effect, would create a two-tier pay system, allowing the company to keep new hires "in-progression" for years before reaching the pay of current employees.

The concessions deal was worked out during a 90-day interim agreement signed following a nine-day strike in late February and early March against the locomotive producer's attempt to unilaterally implement demands that new hires and workers facing temporary lay offs be paid at significantly lower rates of between \$17-\$22 per hour. Current Wabtec workers receive an average of \$35 an hour. Management also demanded the right to hire temporary workers up for up to 25 percent of the workforce who would have no contract rights.

The walkout was the largest industrial action in the United States since Allegheny Technologies lockout of 2,200 steelworkers in 2014-2015. It occurred amidst walkouts of teachers throughout the US and internationally, as well as wildcat strikes in Matamoros, Mexico by over 70,000 maquiladora workers. The UE moved quickly to shut down the locomotive strike fearing that it could spark a broader movement in the working class given the deep built up social anger in the region over job losses and declining wages, including the explosive situation at the Lordstown, Ohio General Motors plant that closed on March 5 after 50 years of operation.

On Thursday, the UE posted a single-page list of "highlights" from the new agreement which, in

addition to creating a ten year in-progression period for new employees, also gives laid-off workers five-year recall rights, allowing the company to erase any wage gains an employee makes if a temporary layoff due to economic recession exceeds that timeframe.

While the company "conceded" to a 10-year rather than its previously demanded 16-year in-progression period for new hires and "committed" to hire at least 100 new full-time workers, several key demands of the workers are not resolved.

Notably, the tentative agreement, which the union called "an important step," says nothing about the company's demand to hire temporary workers who would receive substandard protections and job rights. In addition, the proposal says nothing about the company's demand to eliminate certain job classifications, forcing workers into roles they haven't received training for, potentially endangering themselves and others.

In a further demonstration of the UE's subservience to the profit needs of Wabtec, whose CEO Ray Betler received \$5.3 million in total compensation in 2018, the union kept workers on the job even after the 90-day interim period expired on Tuesday.

Unsurprisingly, union officials joined with city officials and Wabtec management to gloat over the agreement. Scott Slawson, UE Local 506 President, appeared jointly with Wabtec vice president of global operations Greg Sbrocco in an interview with the *Erie Times-News* to declare, "I think both teams worked very hard... I think we have reached a fair agreement. I think we have a good future working together," adding the proposal was "something that we can live with... We understand that there were things that needed to change."

Expressing his satisfaction Sbrocco declared, "let's

get back to business.”

During the strike Slawson appeared at a campaign rally with Democratic Party presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in which the UE official groveled before company management declaring “... we turn a good profit for the company... we were looking for peace, they [Wabtec] were looking for a fight.”

For his part Sanders completely solidarized himself with the UE, praising the sellout interim agreement that shut down the strike at a point where it was winning broader support, thus handing the initiative back to management.

Workers were quick to express their disgust with the latest sellout. “This is an awful deal. 10 years to get to legacy wages?! (Legacy wages are middle class wages)” reads one comment beneath the above cited *Erie Times-News* article.

The worker continues, “In 10 years those legacy wages will be ‘market’ wages ([i.e.] just above poverty). While I understand the Union needs to take care of current members, this deal does little for future members and as the Tier 2 body grows they will dismiss the Union - not very forward thinking. A more sensible deal would be 5 years to get legacy wages. REJECT THIS CONTRACT!”

A worker writes on the UE Local 506 Facebook page, “Everyone is saying congrats, but laid off employees are getting screwed here. With 2 tier, it’s going to tear the union apart over time. This is not acceptable. Shame on everyone who is happy with this. I asked the head HR [Human Resource] guy what the status of 450 [laid off workers was] and his response was ‘they were not on the payroll when Wabtec took over.’... They were not going [to] honor the recall rights at all.”

Workers must vote “no” on this rotten sellout deal. Instead of waiting for the next concessions offer from Wabtec-UE, locomotive workers must take the initiative by forming independent rank-and-file committees to renew the struggle they began in February and expand it throughout the region. Locomotive workers must link their struggles internationally with their industrial peers, as well as with steelworkers in the region, including in upstate New York, where workers at aluminum producer Alcoa-Arconic voted last week to strike.

Workers must demand full benefits and pay for new hires and the rehiring of all previously laid off workers,

as well as substantial pay raises for all current employees. They must reject the efforts of Wabtec to introduce lower paid temp workers and the elimination of safety and work classifications. To fight transnational corporations like Wabtec, workers will be required to adopt an international perspective and strategy to unify their struggles with the developing international strike wave of workers while rejecting the reactionary nationalist demagoguery advanced by the UE and its Democratic Party allies such as Sanders.

The defense of jobs and living standards requires the fight for a socialist program, not the phony “socialism” promoted by Sanders, but a genuine fight to bring industrial giants such as Wabtec under the democratic ownership and control of the working class to produce on a planned basis to meet human need, not profit. This requires a break with the Democratic Party, no less than the Republicans a party of big business, and the development of an independent political party of the working class.



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