

# Shipyard workers launch wildcat strike in Norfolk, Virginia

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Around 40 shipyard workers in Norfolk, Virginia held a six-day wildcat strike last week against defense contractor General Dynamics and BAE Systems after an engineer died from COVID-19 on April 9. Andrew Revell, an employee of General Dynamics and a senior electrician, led a walkout that lasted from April 14 to 19, demanding that the company provide masks, gloves and hand sanitizer as part of a comprehensive coronavirus safety plan.

Revell, who supervises a work crew of 25 workers who repair US Navy ships at the site, started asking the company for personal protection equipment and a safety plan in mid-March. Management took 11 days to reply to his emails and still refused to provide protective gear or even a plan as the pandemic rapidly unfolded. By March 26, shipyard worker Robert Fentress fell ill with COVID-19. He would later succumb to the disease.

To prevent further illness and death, Revell walked out and started distributing leaflets encouraging coworkers to join him. A total of five workers at BAE Systems shipyard have tested positive for the highly contagious respiratory disease.

Revell told the *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper that workers at the shipyard work 2-3 feet apart from one another for hours at a time repairing the guided missile ships USS Bulkeley and USS Gettysburg.

A General Dynamics spokeswoman told the newspaper that the company has made masks, gloves and hand sanitizer available to every employee, which Revell and fellow striker Kim Sumner said was not true. “Bull,” the 53-year-old metalworker replied. “I just don’t want to bring stuff home that will kill my family. We’re risking our lives.” He added that his wife has asthma and his son has an immune deficiency.

On March 24, at another facility owned by General

Dynamics in Maine, Bath Ironworks (BIW), less than half of its scheduled employees reported for work during the morning shift following the company’s first reported case of COVID-19. The action was initiated by rank-and-file workers, independently of the International Association of Machinists. Workers were also not intimidated by management, which released a memo saying that the US Navy had confirmed that the Bath shipyard, was “critical infrastructure” under White House guidance that directed defense contractors to continue to operate normally in the interest of “national security.”

Revell told the *World Socialist Web Site* that little has changed at the BAE Systems shipyard in Norfolk since the strike. “The shipyard started requiring face coverings (they seem to accept any kind) on April 10. However, the requirement is very poorly enforced. Yesterday [April 20], I estimated about a third of the workers were wearing them correctly, a third were not covering the noses, and a third were not wearing any mask at all.

“Even among those wearing coverings, bandanas and loose fabrics that provide almost no protection are common. Temperature checks at the gates started April 15. It’s a good step but based on my research it’s possible to contract and spread the virus with no fever, and those with significantly high temperatures would likely not feel well and stay home, anyway. Our employer started putting together a web page describing steps the company is taking to improve safety, but it reads more like a mostly-empty attempt at reassuring us that the company is doing something, rather than the kind of practical, comprehensive list of safety steps and information we need,” Revell said.

“Another issue is the need for information on those positive cases or symptomatic individuals we may have

been exposed to at work. There have now been a total of five confirmed cases in the yard, and many more symptomatic but untested or awaiting results. I made it clear to our management that reporting and action needs to be primarily symptom-based, not test-based, due to the extreme shortage of tests in our area and long wait times for results. The company has resisted this approach, likely because there would be far more absences if employees are informed that they were in contact with a symptomatic individual and told to self-quarantine, than if employees were only informed and told to self-quarantine if they were in contact with someone who tests positive,” he added.

A few miles north of the BAE Systems shipyard, some 29 workers at Newport News Shipbuilding have contracted COVID-19, prompting the company—the state of Virginia’s largest industrial employer—to announce a reduction in shifts from three to two starting May 4. Newport News Shipbuilding is the only shipyard that builds nuclear-powered aircraft carriers for the US Navy, and one of two that makes and designs submarines. The facility employs 24,700 workers.

According to the Virginia Department of Health, the city of Newport News has 101 cases of COVID-19 while neighboring Hampton has 92; Norfolk has 118; Portsmouth, 82; Chesapeake, 176; Suffolk 111 and Virginia Beach 288, for a total in the Hampton Roads region around 1,000, when smaller cities in the area are included. As in other parts of Virginia and the United States, the official numbers almost certainly underestimate because of limited testing.

Virginia has nearly 10,000 coronavirus cases in total, with a high concentration in the suburbs of Washington, DC—Fairfax county has 2077; Prince William county, 867; Arlington, 625 and Alexandria, 462. More than half of cases reported in the state come from long-term care facilities serving the elderly.

Under Virginia’s stay-at-home order non-essential businesses have been asked to stay closed through May 8. BAE Systems and Newport News Shipbuilding operate as “essential” businesses because they produce major components of American naval power.

While the coronavirus pandemic has drastically altered so much of social life, US military funding and provocations continue at full steam. The Trump administration continues to stage “freedom of

navigation” exercises in the South China Sea. Venezuela remains in the crosshairs, as does Iran.

In fact, the need to maintain combat readiness was behind the recent firing of Brett Crozier, captain of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, for asking his superiors to permit docking to address an outbreak of COVID-19 on the ship.

The Pentagon has also raised concerns about aircraft components and other supplies for the defense industry sourced from Mexican factories, where workers have launched a wave of wildcat strikes following the deaths of workers.

The job actions by BAE Systems workers are part of an international resistance by workers to the dictates of finance capital and its political servants who are demanding the “reopening” of economies in Europe and the United States even though this will only accelerate the spread of the deadly disease.

This working class resistance includes recent walkouts by factory workers in northern Mexico, the actions by Amazon workers in Italy and the United States, health care and meatpacking workers in the US as well as last month’s walkout by US autoworkers.



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