

No talks as Bath shipyard strike in Maine enters day five

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The strike by some 4,300 workers at the Bath Iron Works in Maine continued through its fourth day Thursday with no apparent move to restart negotiations.

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) called the strike Monday after workers rejected the company's "last, best and final" offer by an 87 percent majority. In addition to an inadequate pay raise the deal would have allowed expanded hiring of subcontract workers and eviscerated job classifications. Subcontracting would be permitted even if bargaining unit employees were still on layoff.

In a letter to the IAM Wednesday, management said it was not willing to retreat from its regressive contract proposal and insisted the changes were needed to address its work backlog, stating, "We do not have a secondary or alternative offer to present. We cannot offer a contract that sets this yard up for failure."

The workers build US Navy warships, and the shipyard is some six months behind on the delivery of destroyers fitted with advanced weapons systems. This comes as the Trump administration is ratcheting up global tensions against China, Venezuela, Iran and other countries in the crosshairs of US imperialism. The contract fight has evoked worried comments from the Navy, which wants delivery of the ships as soon as possible.

Despite expressing concerns over the delay in the production of the warships, the IAM evidently felt it could not avoid a strike given the enormous opposition of workers to further concessions while General Dynamics, the owner of the shipyard, is raking in billions in profits.

A spokesman for IAM Local S6 at the shipyard, while claiming the union would stay out as "long as it takes," added elliptically, "But obviously, there is some urgency on our part with members being out of work

and the Navy waiting on ships."

Further stoking the workers' anger is the fact that the last contract negotiated in 2015 contained significant concessions in health care and pensions, pushed through by the IAM on the grounds that it would help Bath Iron Works win additional work from the Coast Guard. The work never materialized.

A worker wrote on Facebook, "The company in no way tried to negotiate a fair contract. For us it was about the language attacking our seniority and subcontractors. And if you want to be technical we haven't had a raise in 8 years, we gave up concessions last contract for coast guard cutters in which we lost."

Another added, "The company is not interested ...at least for now...in actual negotiations. They have and are still demanding that we accept what they have demanded...not anything that is negotiated."

The company hired 1,800 workers last year and plans to hire another 1,000, including subcontractors. Employment now stands at around 6,700.

In March workers at the Bath Iron Works staged a job action, independently of the IAM, after a worker was found to have COVID-19. Workers demanded that production be suspended; however, the company continued operations, pointing to the declaration by the Trump administration that the building of warships was "critical infrastructure." Despite this about 25-30 percent of workers continued to stay home until management issued an ultimatum, not opposed by the union, to return to work in early May.

The stand by Bath shipyard workers was complemented by a similar unofficial action in April by workers at a Norfolk, Virginia, shipyard owned by General Dynamics and operated by BAE systems. About 40 workers staged a six-day wildcat action after an engineer died from COVID-19.

Bath shipyard workers last struck in 2000, for 55 days, over pay and subcontracting. A strike in 1985 lasted 99 days.

The IAM is seeking to isolate the strike by the Bath workers even as management moves strikebreakers across picket lines. It has issued a long list of rules that essentially prevent any effective picketing, including barring pickets from holding conversations with those who cross the picket line to explain the issues in the strike.

No attempt has been made to broaden support for the strike, including appeals to other General Dynamics workers or wider sections of the working class. Neither has there been any mention of deadly conditions in workplaces amid the resurgence of COVID-19.

The IAM has sought out the support of various politicians, primarily Democrats, who with an eye toward the elections have paid lip service to the workers.

On Wednesday, presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden issued a mealy-mouthed statement on the strike couched in national-patriotic terms. “Local S6 members work hard to ensure that our military have the tools they need to be successful,” he declared. “It’s up to us to make sure that those same workers have what they need to accomplish that for their own families.” He continued, “A job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It’s about dignity,” avoiding any mention of the workers’ concrete demands.

Meanwhile, Maine Democratic Governor Janet Mills issued a statement merely calling for a resumption of talks, while expressing concern that the walkout impaired the “ability of [Bath shipyard] workers to deliver much-needed ships to our Navy.”

Bath Iron Works was incorporated in 1884 and began by making metal fitting for wooden ships built in Bath. In 1890 it received its first contract for a complete ship. For most of its existence the shipyard has relied heavily on US navy contracts, including the construction of the battleship Georgia. The Bath Iron Works also produced fishing trawlers, freighters, and yachts throughout the first half of the 20th century.

General Dynamics purchased the operation in 2001. During this period, the shipyard completed the Land Level Transfer Facility, a \$300 million fifteen acre state of the art structure that allows ships to be transferred to a floating dry dock for launch.

The Bath Iron Works are currently completing Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, and the last of three Zumwalt destroyers. The vessels are six months behind schedule.

Amidst the ever-present danger of military conflict and the raging COVID-19 pandemic, enormous pressure will be placed on workers from all quarters to give up their struggle and settle for a rotten agreement. In opposition to this, workers should take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands with the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the unions, and move to link up with the many other sections of workers—autoworkers, food and meat processing workers, nurses and others—who are fighting for safe and decent working conditions.



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