

Bath Iron shipyard workers face stepped-up attacks as strike continues

Shannon Jones
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Shipyard workers at the Bath Iron Works north of Portland, Maine who walked out over contract issues June 22 learned that they have lost health care coverage as the strike by some 4,300 workers continues. There have been no talks since the walkout began, although a federal mediator has now been brought in.

The workers overwhelmingly rejected management's "last, best and final" offer before going on strike. The company had proposed a paltry 3 percent annual wage increase to workers whose wages were frozen in the last contract that expired in 2015. The main point of contention, however, was the company's demand to expand the use of outside contractors that it says are needed to catch up on a backlog of unfinished ships.

The IAM is opposing management's proposal to expand subcontracting and erode seniority rights. There is concern that since management will be able to assign workers to jobs regardless of seniority, it will harass and drive out older, more highly paid workers.

Earlier this week management announced its intention to start hiring more outside contractors as strikebreakers. Management had already been continuing some production, using managers and other non-striking personnel. For its part the International Association of Machinists, the largest union at the shipyard, has remained absolutely passive, curbing the activity of pickets and refusing to mobilize broader support. Its response to the announcement of stepped up strikebreaking by management was to issue pathetic pleas for the company to come to its senses.

The shipyard has a six-month backlog of orders from the US Navy and is one of the five largest suppliers for the Navy, and one of only two facilities that build destroyers. The Navy has expressed concern over the slow pace of work at the shipyard in light of the ongoing preparations for military confrontation with

Russia and China.

Meanwhile, the Maine Centers for Disease Control opened an investigation after four striking workers tested positive for COVID-19. General Dynamics, which owns Bath Iron Works, posted on its Facebook page that any workers should get tested who had been working on the hull of the future USS Carl M. Levin in dock or had been on the picket line between June 22–24.

A worker wrote on Facebook, "I find it strange that a company that employs over 7500+ all of a sudden are reporting case after case of COVID-19... I'd dare say there were many (unreported shhhhh-cases) inside BIW prior to this strike but not reported!"

Another wrote, "Every single contract, the company takes and takes, more and more every time! I am all for this strike and even if I was to lose everything we have worked for and have to start over at a minimum wage job flipping burgers, it sure as hell beats getting screwed by BIW! We can walk out with our heads held high knowing we at least didn't bend over and take it."

Several workers pointed to the irony of the fact that COVID-19 cases among shipyard workers are being reported just as the company has cancelled health benefits.

One wrote, "Cost of COBRA insurance is out of reach for most people who have No or very limited income. COBRA can cost well over \$1,000+ a month."

In a further provocation, management posted a notice on its website directing workers to free COVID-19 testing services and other medical resources.

The shipyard had remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, citing a ruling by the Trump administration that the building of warships is "critical infrastructure." In March, workers at the shipyard had staged a job action independent of the IAM after a

worker was diagnosed with COVID-19, but were eventually forced back to work.

In a letter to the IAM, General Dynamics CEO Phebe Novakovics wrote, “This contract puts us at a competitive disadvantage” as the company tries to get through its work backlog. “We must be responsive to the changes in our workforce, our shipyard and the needs of our customer. We are not currently.”

General Dynamics recorded over \$3 billion in profits in 2019. The company just landed a new four-year \$104 million submarine contract at its General Dynamics Mission Systems facility in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The contract is for development and production of the Dreadnought-class ballistic missile submarine. The massive Pentagon budget recently approved by the US Congress provisions \$4.4 billion specifically for Columbia-class submarines as part of its buildup of nuclear capabilities. This promises a bonanza for General Dynamics and other merchants of death.

While demanding concessions from shipyard workers the company reportedly has used some of its \$15.3 billion in gross profits since 2018 to buy back some \$2.4 billion in its own stock in order to enrich investors and top company officers.

In 2015 workers at the Bath shipyard took substantial cuts in health care and pensions along with a wage freeze, supposedly to ensure the competitive position of the company. While bloated with profits the company is coming back for a second helping in 2020. In 2018 Bath Iron Works pocketed \$45 million in tax breaks courtesy of the Maine legislature.

As a result of the vast expansion of US military spending the Bath shipyard has a bulging order book from the Navy, which has awarded contracts for 47 Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, only 36 of which have been delivered. The ships carry a price tag of a jaw dropping \$1.8 billion apiece.

Bath shipyard workers face enormous dangers due to the deliberate isolation of their strike by the IAM in the face of increasing provocations on the part of management. The IAM has tied the hands of picketers to the extent that they have even been banned from talking to strikebreakers.

There is enormous potential for breaking the isolation of the strike, which by all accounts has won enormous support in the local community. This requires workers taking the struggle into their own hands through the

building of a rank-and-file strike committee.

The strike takes place amid unprecedented conditions of social unrest and political radicalization as reflected in the mass nationwide and global protests against police violence. At the same time, corporations are using the crisis created by the pandemic to carry out brutal restructuring and cost cutting on the backs of workers. Striking workers should reach out for support to other sections of workers coming into struggles—logistics workers at UPS and Amazon, teachers, health care workers, public sector workers and autoworkers. They must insist on the right to decent income, safe and healthy working conditions and job security.

Workers can no longer accept the subordination of every aspect of life to the mad drive for profit by the corporate elite. This requires the reorganization of social and economic life on the basis of production for human need, not private profit.



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