

Bath Iron Works expands strikebreaking operation as Maine shipyard walkout continues

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The strike by 4,300 shipbuilders at the Bath Iron Works in Maine is continuing into its third week with a federal mediator meeting with the union Monday in an effort to end the walkout at the facility, which builds ships for the US Navy. The strike began June 22 over contract issues, with workers voting by 87 percent to reject demands by General Dynamics, the shipyard operator, for a big expansion of outside contract labor.

This week, Bath Ironworks said it would lay off several dozen non-striking workers from International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local S7 who work as surveyors and trade inspectors. At the same time that management is laying off these workers, it has announced plans to step up its strikebreaking operation by hiring hundreds more outside contractors. Management has been attempting to maintain production during the strike, using about 2,500 contractors along with non-striking members of other unions.

About 220 machinists belonging to Local S7 at the shipyard have been crossing the picket lines of the far larger Local S6, whose members are on strike. The IAM has not raised any objections to other IAM members continuing to work inside the shipyard alongside strikebreakers in the midst of the bitter strike. In fact, this scandalous situation would not be possible without the blessing of the national IAM leadership.

A statement issued by Bath Iron Works President Dirk Lesko said the layoffs were temporary and were the result of the disruption caused by the strike.

By all accounts, workers are receiving warm and generous support from the community. However, like in so many past struggles, the role of the IAM has been to isolate and wear down the resistance of workers to

concessions.

The main fear of the IAM and the AFL-CIO labor federation is not that workers will be defeated and forced to take concessions, but that the strike will encourage broader resistance in the working class. This is particularly the case as outrage grows over the reckless return-to-work and return-to-school policies as the pandemic continues to rage.

The shipyard is some six months behind in the delivery of destroyers to the US Navy, even as the US steps up its provocations against China and Russia. The shipyard is currently building six Arleigh Burke-class destroyers along with a Zumwalt-class destroyer with each ship having a price tag of well over \$1 billion.

Under management's new contract proposal, the company will be given expanded powers to hire subcontractors while seniority rights will be undermined, with management able to assign jobs regardless of length of service. Workers also report that the company wants to increase medical insurance deductibles, offsetting a paltry three percent annual wage increase.

An electrician at the Bath Iron Works wrote on Facebook "Even the supervisors have had enough! I've spoken with some. Its upper management that has been and unless you fix it, WILL be the problem! No one is happy with your experienced workers being out but the contract you put forward was bad. Take out subcontractors and seniority! That's the first step."

The last contract in 2015 contained a wage freeze and other concessions that management claimed would help secure additional work for the shipyard. While the company has fattened its profits off the massive increase in military spending and the corporate tax

handouts enacted by the Trump administration, predictably nothing is going back to the workers. Instead, General Dynamics has used \$2.4 billion of its \$15.3 billion in profits since 2018 to buy back its own stock in order to inflate share values.

A total of six Bath shipyard workers have tested positive for COVID-19, with three reported new cases diagnosed since the start of the strike. Management has maintained operations throughout the pandemic on the grounds that warships are “critical infrastructure.”

Showing its utter disdain for its employees, the company cut workers off their company-paid health insurance on June 30.

The strategy of the IAM has been directed entirely at appealing for support from the political establishment on the grounds that General Dynamics is undermining national security by refusing to negotiate a contract.

Several local Maine politicians as well as presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden have issued perfunctory and platonic statements of support for striking workers, or more specifically for a return to negotiations.

IAM President Robert Martinez Jr. also sent a letter to the Trump administration asking for the help of the White House in resolving the strike. In the letter, the IAM said it would be willing “to work with all partners in the fight to save these vitally important jobs. We respectfully ask you to join us in this effort. We ask that you start by sending a strong reminder to the company of its commitment to these workers to the American public, to our men and women in uniform, who rely on world class ships built by world class workers...”

The assertion by the IAM that it will work with all “partners”—i.e. corporate management—to “save” jobs leaves little doubt that the union is prepared to hand over more concessions in exchange for maintaining its franchise and ability to extract dues from workers. For four decades, the fight to “save jobs” has been the mantra of the trade union bureaucracy as it has bargained away gains won by workers over the course of countless bitter struggles. In the process, the unions oversaw the destruction of millions of jobs while workers’ incomes declined or stagnated and social inequality increased to unheard-of levels.

According to the website Indeed.com, some jobs at the Bath Iron Works pay as little as \$12 an hour. It is

one of the largest employers in Maine and has been in operation since the late 19th century. It was acquired by General Dynamics in 1995. It has built well over 100 destroyers, frigates, cruisers and other Navy combat vessels.

The last strike at the Bath Iron Works was in 2000 and lasted 55 days. Workers rejected two contract proposals supported by the union before accepting a contract that still fell far short of their demands by 65 percent. The main issue was changes to contract language relating to job classifications as well as the demand for annual wage increases of eight percent followed by seven percent and seven percent. A strike in 1985 lasted 99 days.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party urge Bath shipyard workers to establish a rank-and-file strike committee to take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the IAM. There is an urgent need to expand the struggle and mobilize support from workers across the region nationally and internationally behind their fight. This includes, teachers, transport workers, health care workers, autoworkers and other ship builders. No help will be forthcoming from the representatives of the two big-business parties. Workers must rely on their own strength, but this requires a break with the corporate-controlled unions and their political alliance with the Democrats and Republicans.

At the same time, US workers must unite with workers around the world to oppose the drive to war and to transform the military industrial complex into socially useful industries, as part of the socialist reorganization of economic and political life.



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