

Bath shipyard strike in danger as walkout enters sixth week

Shannon Jones
28 July 2020

As 4,300 shipbuilders at the Bath Iron Works (BIW) north of Portland, Maine, enter their sixth week of strike, defense contractor General Dynamics is continuing production of US Navy ships with strikebreakers. The company is being assisted by non-striking members of other union locals.

Management shows absolutely no sign of retreating from its demands relating to increased subcontracting and attacks on seniority rights despite reports that it is falling further behind schedule of the delivery of guided missile destroyers to the US Navy. The silence of US Navy officials and the White House on the walkout demonstrates support for the strikebreaking operation aimed at starving workers into submission.

For their part, workers are trying to survive on a mere \$150 in weekly strike pay as well as local food donations. The International Association of Machinists, which is sitting on nearly \$250 million in assets, has not proposed any additional strike assistance nor has there been a call to other well-heeled unions, such as the United Auto Workers with nearly \$1 billion in assets, for help. The last strike in 2000 lasted 55 days.

General Dynamics wants to convert the highly skilled Bath Iron Works labor force into low paid, contingent employees serving at management's whim. They are being assisted in this objective by the IAM and the AFL-CIO, which have isolated the workers from broader sections of the working class. As part of this, the IAM has tolerated, indeed welcomed, the strikebreaking of other, smaller, union locals which are continuing to work in the shipyard while their brothers and sisters walk the picket lines.

In a highly provocative move, management terminated health benefits for strikers July 1, despite a spate of new COVID-19 infections among workers, likely contracted at the shipyard. In March, BIW

workers staged a job protest demanding a shutdown of the shipyard as coronavirus spread. The Trump administration then intervened to declare navy shipyards "critical infrastructure."

At a strike rally Saturday, IAM President Richard Martinez Jr., whose reported 2019 compensation was \$371,580, offered nothing but empty platitudes about fighting "corporate greed" along with stock nationalist demagogic. In June, Martinez sent an appeal to President Trump arguing that the company's intransigence was undermining US "naval preparedness." The IAM has also sent letters to Navy Secretary Ken Braithwaite and to Congress.

The IAM invited Maine House Speaker Sara Gideon, a Democrat, to address the strike rally. Gideon is challenging incumbent Republican Senator Susan Collins in the November general election and has said little about the strike except expressing the hope for a "fair contract." Both Gideon and Collins visited the IAM picket line last week to profess "support" for the strikers.

Neither Collins nor Gideon have proposed any concrete assistance to the workers, merely declaring their wish for management and the union to resume talks. No face-to-face talks have taken place since the walkout began June 22. The only communications have been through a federal mediator.

For her part, Collins issued a statement equating solidarity with BIW workers with support for unrestrained militarism. "I can help them as I've always helped them, and that's by ensuring that BIW gets contracts, that we have an adequate shipbuilding budget, and we continue to pursue the goal of a 355-ship Navy."

The IAM endorsed Collins, who holds a position on the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, in

her 2014 Senate race.

According to one source, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing strike have put the shipyard up to one year behind on the delivery of ships under its current contract with the Navy. It is currently working on the completion of several high tech Arleigh Burke-class destroyers and the last of three Zumwalt-class destroyers.

BIW claims that its demand to hire virtually unlimited numbers of subcontractors is necessary to allow it to catch up on the completion of its backlog of ships.

General Dynamics reported earnings of \$708 million in the first quarter of 2020 and has lucrative Navy contracts booked well into the future. Despite this, management claims the yard is not “competitive” with other US shipyards, particularly on the Gulf Coast where labor costs are lower and the climate is more favorable.

One of Bath’s largest competitors is Ingalls Shipbuilding in Mississippi, where workers are members of the IAM and several other unions. However, at no time has the IAM suggested any manner of united action with these workers, despite management’s efforts at pitting one section of workers against another in a race to the bottom.

The Bath strike is in serious danger and cannot be won on the present basis, forcing workers at one shipyard to battle alone against a multibillion-dollar defense contractor and key component of the massive US military industrial complex.

The strategy of the IAM is not only bankrupt but is aimed at deliberately isolating workers and wearing them down. What the IAM fears more than anything is that the stand by shipyard workers will find broader support in the working class under conditions of massive social tensions in the midst of a raging pandemic.

The IAM has demonstrated its opposition to any serious measures to prosecute the strike. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party urge Bath shipyard workers to organize a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the IAM to carry forth their struggle. What is required is the broadest mobilization of the working class in opposition to the massive strikebreaking opposition being mounted by BIW. Appeals must be made to shipyard workers in the US

and internationally, teachers, autoworkers, steelworkers, logistics workers and other sections of the working class.

This must be combined with a political strategy aimed at ending the subordination of economic and political life to the profit demands of the corporations and to transform the war-making industries into useful production, including the manufacture of life-saving equipment during the pandemic.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact