

As Bath shipyard workers poised to vote, machinists union, management and White House praise sellout deal

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18 August 2020

Shipbuilders at the Bath Iron Works (BIW) are set to vote over the weekend on a new collective bargaining agreement reached between the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) Local S6 and management. The tentative contract covers some 4,300 workers at the shipyard who have been on strike since June 22 and is, by all accounts, tailored directly to the needs of management.

BIW is one of the largest employers in Maine, with about 6,800 total workers. General Dynamics, the owner of the Bath Iron Works, is a highly profitable defense contractor. On August 5 the company board of directors approved a dividend of \$1.10 a share despite the strike and the ongoing pandemic. The company reported net earnings of \$625 million in the second quarter of 2020. For 2019 it reported profits of \$3.5 billion, helped along by a \$45 million tax handout from the state of Maine.

On August 11 the US Army awarded General Dynamics a five-year \$428.2 million contract to perform maintenance work on Stryker combat vehicles.

The deal has produced a cascade of self-congratulatory statements by corporate management, the IAM and the Trump White House. Following the announcement of the settlement, President Trump tweeted “CONGRATS to General Dynamic’s Bath Iron Works & Local S6 on reaching a tentative agreement after the long strike. GD builds GREAT Arleigh-Burke destroyers. Super boost for Maine Economy. Glad to have helped. I’ve done a lot for Maine!”

The Trump administration opted to strike a pose of neutrality, sending trade representative Peter Navarro to shepherd along talks.

The IAM, meanwhile, wrapped itself in the flag and mouthed nationalist demagogy, accusing management of impeding the US military buildup.

Full details of the deal are not available as of this writing. While the union says it prevented management from modifying existing language on subcontracting, a major issue in the walkout, the company will be permitted to retain subcontractors and strikebreakers it brought in during the strike. The contract provides for minimal 3 percent annual wage increases and the continuation of existing health care coverage, which the company had cut off during the strike. However, charges related to alleged picket line infractions on the part of strikers will not be withdrawn, leaving workers subject to victimization.

The IAM has hailed the deal as a victory, but the fact that management will retain strikebreakers indicates otherwise. Management had insisted it needed to hire more subcontractors and undermine seniority provisions in order to deal with a six-month backlog of uncompleted work on US Navy destroyers, which it now says has expanded to a nearly one-year backlog.

According to reports, the agreement “streamlines” the process of hiring subcontractors and the union has agreed to mediated discussions on the question of overcoming the work backlog. Workers will return to work if the contract is ratified, making the strike 63 days. The previous strike in 2000 lasted 55 days.

The last contract in 2016 contained significant concessions, which the IAM claimed were necessary to secure a US Coast Guard contract for BIW. The Coast Guard deal never materialized, but the company retained the concessions.

Throughout the bitter strike, the main preoccupation

of the IAM was to contain the struggle and prevent workers from linking up with the mounting resistance to the homicidal back-to-work policy of both the Democrats and Republicans. The IAM isolated the strike; it never sought to mobilize support from other workers at BIW in different locals, who continued work during the strike, nor did it appeal to workers at other Navy shipyards.

Significantly, the IAM made no attempt to raise the issue of health and safety in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, in spite of the fact that the virus has run rampant at shipyards throughout the country.

These includes the Ingalls shipyards in Pascagoula, Mississippi and Newport News, Virginia where there have been major outbreaks of COVID-19 infections. As of Tuesday there have been 619 cases reported at the Pascagoula shipyard. At last report there were over 340 at the Ingalls Newport News operation. US shipyards have maintained full operations during the pandemic under cover of their status as “critical infrastructure.”

On March 24, after the first COVID-19 case was reported at BIW, over half the workforce called in sick. Demands for a two-week shutdown were rejected. Despite this, a large portion of the workforce continued to take sick leave until management and the union forced them back to work in May.

Last week, BIW reported the 9th case of COVID-19 at the shipyard, a contractor. Three new cases had been reported prior to the start of the strike.

General Dynamics CEO Phebe Novakovic said she was “pleased to have reached an agreement” with the union. She praised Trump advisor Peter Navarro and Jimmy Hart, head of the AFL-CIO Metal Trade Department, for “bringing the parties together.”

For his part, Dirk Lesko, president of BIW, wrote, “This agreement, coupled with our hiring initiatives and major investments in facilities and production processes, positions BIW and LS6 to partner together to improve schedule performance, restore the yard’s competitiveness and ensure Bath Built remains Best Built for generations to come.”

In a post on its website, Local S6 boasted openly of the benefits of the contract for the company. “We believe this agreement gives BIW the tools they need to have, and the ability to respond to the unpredictability of their day to day needs.” It continued, “This was a testament to the power of collective bargaining and a

strong educated unit that backed the Local S6 Negotiating Committee.”

In a further indication of the corporatist identification of the IAM with management, Local S6 said that BIW would print and mail copies of the tentative agreement to workers ahead of the vote.

Workers are now being sent back to work during a raging pandemic, forced to work shoulder-to-shoulder with strikebreakers, with only minimal pay increases.

One worker noted sarcastically, “Just wanted to thank the company for their extravagant gift for my 30 [years] of service. A sticker for two neck surgeries and [30 years] of my life, what more could anyone ask. And a contract that doesn't keep up with the cost of living with many more concessions. You have my undoing loyalty to your royalty. Wouldn't want to cut into their growing perks.”

Workers should draw the lessons of this bitter experience and develop their own independent rank-and-file workplace committees as their eyes and voice. Workers have the right to decent conditions, including a safe and healthy workplace. These rights can only be secured through an independent struggle by workers in opposition to the pro-corporate IAM.



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