

Hydraulic manufacturing workers strike at Custom Hoists in Ohio

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On June 13, roughly 70 workers at the Custom Hoists facility in Ashland County, Ohio walked off the job during the 6 p.m. shift and set up picket lines outside the facility. The strike was initiated after a contract negotiated between United Steelworkers (USW) Local 7008 and the hydraulic cylinder manufacturer was overwhelmingly rejected, with 66 “no” votes and only 2 “yes” votes.

Custom Hoists, which produces hydraulic cylinders for use in heavy industrial vehicles and machinery, has an estimated revenue is roughly \$34 million and is a subsidiary of Standex International, which had a revenue of over \$604 million in 2020. Custom Hoists is a global company with another facility in Tianjin, China and operates warehouses and service centers in Europe.

The strike at Custom Hoists takes place amid ongoing strikes at Volvo Truck, steelmaker Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) and coal company Warrior Met. Despite these strikes spanning various industries, they have been defined by growing anger from workers at decades of austerity contracts and dangerous working conditions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the details of the proposed contract between Custom Hoists and the USW have not been published, workers at the plant have demanded higher wages, lower insurance premiums and better working conditions. Mike Frymier, who has worked at the company for 37 years, told the *Ashland Source*, “We were deemed essential during the pandemic... Then, in return for that, we got literally nothing.”

According to Frymier, the facility remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and only closed for two days due to potential COVID-19 cases.

Ashland County, which has a population of less than 54,000, has had 4,355 confirmed COVID-19 cases and

97 deaths. COVID Act Now, a nonprofit initiative that provides data about the virus, gave the county a medium risk level. Less than 34 percent of the population have received even one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Another major complaint by strikers is the growth of a two-tier wage system, which has resulted in some workers receiving \$6 less per hour for the same work. USW officials have also cited the company using temporary workers for lengthy periods of time as a major issue.

In a tacit admission of past betrayals by the USW, Ray Bowman, a member of the union negotiating team and vice president of Local 7008, told the *Ashland Source* that he had been “unsatisfied” by the previous three contracts. The local, however, had not gone on strike since the year 2000.

The multi-tier system and continued austerity contracts is made more egregious given that many workers have dedicated 30 to 40 years of their lives turning Custom Hoists into a multi-million dollar company.

Mike Kuharik, the president of Custom Hoists, says the company is currently working with a lawyer to resolve the contract dispute. As of the writing of this article, no timeline or deadline for negotiations have been announced.

While the strike at Custom Hoists has broken out during multiple struggles being led by the USW, the union has acted to keep each strike and lockout completely isolated. 1,300 strikers at ATI—which operates in Ohio and four other states—have been on strike since March 30 with the union claiming the walkout is in response to ATI’s “unfair labor practice” and not an economic strike.

The USW has made no attempt to link up the ATI

strikers with the 650 refinery workers in Beaumont, Texas who have been locked out by ExxonMobil since May 1 or 2,500 steelworkers in Quebec who recently concluded a strike against ArcelorMittal.

Even though the Custom Hoists strike has been going on for just under a week, the USW website does not include any reference to the strike.

The attempt to isolate workers' struggles, however, is not limited to the USW, but has become a feature of the union bureaucracy as a whole. At Warrior Met Coal, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) has resorted to thuggish tactics against opposition. The Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) has refused to provide any strike pay for 700 nurses that walked off in opposition to unsafe staffing ratios.

At the New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia, Volvo Truck workers have responded to the attempts by the company and the United Auto Workers (UAW) to force through a concessions contract, by forming the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC). In response to the attempts by the UAW to isolate and starve the 3,000 strikers, the VWRFC has issued an open letter to demand the union provide adequate strike pay and not accept the concessions being demanded by the company.

The formation of the VWRFC shows that it is possible for workers to break free of the isolation and concessions that have been imposed for decades by the official union bureaucracies. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages workers at Custom Hoists to contact us for help building a committee at their workplace, and to reach out to other striking workers in order to connect their struggles.



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