IAM working to isolate walkout by 800 Chicago-area mechanics after overwhelming strike vote

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On Monday, 800 auto mechanics at 56 car dealerships in Chicago and the surrounding area, members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) Local 701, walked out after voting to strike. Workers voted to walk out by an overwhelming 99 percent after rejecting the New Car Dealer Committee of Chicago's (NCDC) contract proposal by 97 percent.

The mechanics are fighting against the NCDC's plan to reduce weekly guaranteed paid hours for journeyman technicians, the top tier of pay, based on whether or not workers meet the dealership's productivity expectations rather than the number of hours they are actually in the shop. They have faced precarious conditions during the pandemic in which measures to contain the spread of the disease led to reduced productivity in many shops. These measures were out of the control of the mechanics themselves.

Workers are also fighting for better health care benefits, more funding for the training fund, an increase of qualified staff, an improvement to retirement benefits and more paid time off.

However, under the Local 701 July 31 Comprehensive Counterproposal, dealerships' profits would not be impacted and the overall compensation of mechanics would be frozen, if not lowered, from terms under the previous contract. Wages for the lowest tier of journeyman mechanics begin at $38.85 per hour in the first year and end at $43.15 in the last year of the four-year contract, barely $3.00 per hour above what the NCDC proposed. Apprentices will have their hourly rate increased to $21.00 per hour in the union's proposal but will receive only a $1.00 per hour increase in the third year of the contract.

For the lowest paid tier of full-time workers, lube rack technicians, the union proposes an increase to $16.00 per hour, just $1.00 per hour above Chicago's minimum wage, or a $0.50 per hour increase (whichever is higher) for the duration of the contract. None of these proposed wage increases will keep up with the projected rate of inflation over the next four years.

The union is also proposing the elimination of an extremely limited health care plan option and its replacement with a plan that offers more coverage but adds an increased cost of $10 per week for the duration of the contract for workers not already on the plan. The union also proposes to increase the rate that dealerships pay into the training fund to $0.07 per hour by the end of the contract, which it admits is a minimal cost to the dealers.

Local 701 accepts the exact same terms that the NCDC proposes for pandemic-related absences. If an employee with health conditions that put him at risk is offered an "accommodation," according to the dealer, then he must go to work. Otherwise, if the worker cannot come to work, then he will be placed on an "uncompensated leave of absence" for up to one year, even if a doctor makes the recommendation. This is in line with other unions, such as the United Auto Workers, which have refused to guarantee full paid time off to workers with severe health risks.

The IAM recently partnered with the NCDC, along with the Chicago Federation of Labor and the Illinois AFL-CIO, to support Illinois HB3940, which passed July 30. While the bill supposedly protects the rights of dealer mechanics, the bill in fact protects dealers, requiring a certain level of reimbursement by auto suppliers for warranty repairs.

It should be noted that Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, hailed as a friend of labor by the IAM, declared auto mechanic shops as "essential industries" during the first set of statewide lockdowns implemented in March, exempting auto mechanics from protections during the earliest stages of the pandemic.

On Tuesday, less than two days into the strike, IAM Local 701 reported on its Facebook page that it had reached what it calls a "Defector's agreement" at 27 area dealerships outside of the NCDC. But nowhere is it explained exactly what has been agreed upon.

Local 701 later stated that it had ratified the Defector's agreement with nine additional dealerships and was in discussions to get it ratified at an additional 10 dealerships over the course of the week. The union also stated that it was "actively negotiating (using the Defector deal as a template) with well over another 10 additional dealerships. Once finalized and voted, that will put the number of dealerships under the

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Defector's deal at a minimum of 56—essentially the same number of dealerships as are in the NCDC."

The Defector's agreement has been agreed to by both the union and the NCDC, meaning that IAM has already worked out an agreement with those dealerships on employer-friendly terms. The IAM stated on its Facebook page on July 31 that "we informed the NCDC that the Local 701 bargaining committee would accept and recommend the 'DEFECTORS' deal 'as is.'" This should be a warning to workers on strike that the IAM does not have any intention of negotiating in their interests but sees its role as a labor contractor for the dealers.

This is not even the first set of side agreements that the IAM has reached. The week before the strike began, IAM Local 701 posted on its homepage on August 2 that "the Union membership ratified an agreement with an association representing approximately 30 dealerships."

One worker pointed to the hypocrisy of the IAM's isolation tactic: "An act or instance of uniting or joining two or more things into one: UNION. How many UNIONS have multiple contracts?"

The IAM has a record of betrayal. In 2017 approximately 2,000 mechanics at 130 dealerships in the Chicago area struck. In that struggle, the IAM went behind their backs by signing "interim" agreements with more than half of the 130 dealers and sent mechanics back to work at these locations. This is approximately the number of dealerships with which the IAM claims it has already negotiated company-friendly agreements.

The strikebreaking role of the IAM cannot be overstated. The workers at these dealerships have been divided from their striking colleagues, isolating the strike and putting workers in danger of being defeated.

In the contract it pushed through in September 2017, the IAM agreed to reduce guaranteed weekly hours for mechanics and to increase out-of-pocket health care costs. The union essentially gave the NCDC what it demanded, betraying workers who had struggled for over almost two months on the picket lines.

The contract it pushed through largely mirrored that of the side deals that it made with the other dealerships. Mechanics are paid by the hours assigned to each task, rather than by the hours that they actually work. This Byzantine scheme, that favors the large car companies, was retained in the 2017 contract. The contract mirrored the side deals, giving mechanics a guaranteed base rate going from 34 hours per week to 35 hours in the second year of the contract and another increase to 36 hours in the fourth year of the contract.

By contrast in 2017 mechanics went on strike to demand a guaranteed base rate of 40 hours per week. Now the IAM is willing to accept a tier of base rate pay at 36.1 hours per week, which is exactly what the dealerships offered in the last contract.

The IAM carried out this betrayal in spite of the militancy and determination of the workers through its isolation tactics. The workers courageously voted down the first agreement that the IAM brought forward, defying management threats to cut off health care benefits, and facing down company and police harassment on picket lines. Only after seven weeks on strike was the union was able to push through a second agreement by an 85 percent margin.

The overwhelming strike vote by Chicago-area mechanics is an expression of a growing wave of working-class opposition around the country and world to the endless demands for austerity. This presents the opportunity for workers to unify their struggles nationally and globally.

Mechanics can look to the recent struggle of Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia, who defied similar attempts by the UAW to push through a company-friendly contract. They recognized the international character of their struggle and formed their own organization to fight for their interests, the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Through the assistance of the committee workers voted down the pro-corporate UAW contracts three times.

The formation of the rank-and-file committee at Volvo dealt a serious blow to the ability of the unions to work with the corporations against the interests of the working class. The fight continues and must expand in the face of antidemocratic measures taken by the UAW to force through the contract after it was voted down by the rank and file.

Mechanics in the Chicago area are encouraged to follow this example and form their own rank-and-file committees. We warn that the IAM is moving quickly to isolate the strike. Workers need to counter this with a strategy aimed at expanding the strike.

The WSWS will help mechanics who want to build this leadership and to formulate a set of demands based on what workers need, not what the corporations and unions say they can afford and advance a strategy for linking up the struggle of mechanics with autoworkers and the wider working class in a common struggle. To learn about how to build a rank-and-file committee, contact the WSWS today.

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