

As strike by Chicago-area auto mechanics enters second week, International Association of Machinists undermines struggle

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In the second week of a strike by 800 Chicago-area auto mechanics, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) Local 701 continues its information blackout on negotiations with the New Car Dealer Committee (NCDC) of Chicago and has expanded the number of dealerships with which it has signed the “Defector’s agreement,” isolating the striking mechanics from the wider working class.

The mechanics went on strike on August 2, voting to strike by an overwhelming 99 percent after 97 percent voted against the NCDC’s contract to replace the previous four-year agreement that expired on July 31. The IAM had apparently been negotiating with the NCDC since the beginning of the year.

The auto mechanics are fighting against the NCDC’s plan to reduce weekly guaranteed paid hours for journeymen technicians, the top tier of pay, based on the dealership’s productivity demands rather than the number of hours workers spend at the shop. They 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.

Far from fighting in the best interests of the workers, the IAM is carrying out strikebreaking by signing deals one by one with dealerships under a separate “Defector’s agreement,” replacing the Standard Automotive Agreement pattern under which the workers initiated their strike. It is still not clear what exactly is included in the Defector’s agreement, but it likely does not contain much that will advance workers interests, since the dealers have voluntarily agreed to them.

Workers must draw the lessons of the role played by

the IAM in their 2017 strike. While Local 701 engaged in negotiation theatre, posturing as if they were in a head-to-head fight with the company, it used side deals to isolate the pickets and break the strike, agreeing to terms that set the stage for further fracturing of the workers’ struggle.

Now, both the union and dealerships in the NCDC are collaborating to end the strike by forcing through concessions that favor the dealers using the Defector’s agreement. By August 6, 55 dealers total had signed the Defector’s agreement, and Local 701 wrote on its home page that it was negotiating with at least a dozen more. The local’s website has not provided any other updates on negotiations with the NCDC since August 6.

There is a sentiment among workers that the IAM has consciously worked to weaken the strike by refusing to call out all the workers in the local on strike and signing separate agreements one by one over the past two weeks. The Local 701 Facebook page has not given any public updates on the negotiations with the dealers since August 4. As one worker commented bluntly on the page, “We are split up, which makes our strike less effective.”

Local 701 put forward its Comprehensive Counterproposal for workers under the Standard Automotive Agreement on July 31. But even if this is ultimately accepted by whatever dealerships remain under the Standard Automotive Agreement, it will not impact the dealerships’ profits and will only maintain, if not lower, the standard of living imposed on mechanics under terms of the last contract.

Under the union’s counterproposal, wages for the lowest tier of journeymen 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 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 lube rack technicians, the lowest paid tier of full-time workers, the IAM 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 consumer price inflation over the next four years, which is currently higher in the Midwest than in the rest of the US, at 5.9 percent. The counterproposal also proposes limited health care benefits and for dealerships to pay into the training fund at a minimal rate.

Striking Chicago-area mechanics must oppose the efforts to isolate their strike. This means taking control of the strike out of the hands of the IAM, which is determined to sabotage their struggle in the interests of maintaining the profits of dealers.

The overwhelming strike vote by Chicago-area mechanics is part of a growing wave of working-class opposition around the country and the world to the austerity drive of big business. Fearful of this growing movement, the Biden administration is seeking to use the unions to control the class struggle.

Mechanics in the Chicago area do not need to repeat the experience of the 2017 strike. They should take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and the twin capitalist political parties.

In 2017, the workers courageously voted down the first agreement that the IAM brought forward after workers had sacrificed weeks of pay while on strike, defied threats to cut off health care benefits, and withstood company and police harassment on picket lines. The union pushed through a second agreement after a total of seven weeks on strike by an 85 percent margin.

The IAM was able to carry out this betrayal in spite of the militancy and determination of the workers through its backhanded isolation tactics. As a result of the union's strikebreaking in 2017, the 2021 strike began with less than half of the number of mechanics who went on strike in the 2017 involved in the struggle.

In 2017, some 2,000 mechanics went on strike to guarantee a 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 proposed in the last contract.

The struggle by Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia shows the way forward. The autoworkers in Virginia recognized the international character of their struggle and formed their own organization to fight for their interests, the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC). The committee organized resistance to the repeated attempts by the United Auto Workers to force through a sellout agreement. The rank-and-file workers issued their own set of demands based on their needs and wrote statements to appeal to workers worldwide to take up their fight in solidarity.

The influence of the VWRFC was powerful and ignited solidarity actions and statements from workers throughout the US, as well as India and Volvo Cars workers in Ghent, Belgium. Through the influence and struggle of the committee for leadership, the workers voted down the pro-corporate UAW contracts three times before the UAW resorted to the most anti-democratic measures to implement a concessions contract.

The WSWS will help mechanics who want to build rank-and-file committees and a new leadership to formulate a set of demands based on what workers need, not what the corporations and unions say they can afford. To learn about how to build a rank-and-file committee, contact the WSWS today.



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