

Deere workers speak out as they gear up for contract battle

Marcus Day, George Gallanis

19 August 2021

To get in touch with the World Socialist Web Site to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee, John Deere workers can email deerewrfc@gmail.com or text ?(484) 514-9797?.

As contract negotiations between the United Auto Workers (UAW) and farm and construction equipment giant Deere & Company officially begin this week, Deere workers are gearing up for a fight to reverse decades of concessions enforced by the union.

Formal talks between Deere and the UAW began on Tuesday, and the current six-year contract expires on October 1. The new contract would cover approximately 10,100 workers from plants predominantly in Iowa and Illinois, as well as a Kansas facility.

There are already signs that Deere workers are eager and determined to win back what the UAW has willingly given up over many years. A statement published on the WSWS Wednesday, UAW and John Deere meet to negotiate on how to ram through a sellout contract, was widely circulated by Deere workers on social media Thursday.

The statement explained that the so-called “negotiations” between the UAW and Deere are not adversarial talks between competing interests, but rather strategy sessions between two “partners” over how best to overcome opposition among workers to yet another pro-corporate agreement. Thus, to combat this union-company gang-up, it is necessary for workers to move quickly to initiate and build up new organizations, rank-and-file committees, which will serve as mechanisms for a broad-based fight for workers’ interests.

Fearful of workers’ enthusiastic response to this perspective and unable to refute it, the UAW is instead resorting to censorship, removing workers’ posts of the statement from Facebook groups.

The UAW is keeping workers entirely in the dark on its discussions with the company, one Deere worker told the

WSWS, “We have heard nothing from our local or International on the negotiations. Nothing. Only rumors from workers. Your website is providing us more information than our own union!”

The UAW has not published anything on negotiations with Deere on its website or Facebook page. As it has done on many previous occasions, most recently with the five-week-long Volvo Trucks strike earlier this year, it is imposing a blackout on negotiations, hoping to keep Deere workers isolated from broader sections of the working class.

The Deere worker explained how he had become increasingly disillusioned with the UAW, saying, “I remember in 2015 when you published articles on the corruption of the UAW. I had a hard time accepting it then, but now, with so many UAW presidents in jail, I believe it.”

To date, 12 UAW officials have been indicted in the course of a years-long federal corruption investigation, which revealed that top union executives were engaged in bribe taking and embezzlement of members’ dues. Those who have pleaded guilty to the charges include not only two former UAW presidents, but also former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who oversaw the last Deere contract negotiations in 2015, and who was released early from his wrist-slap sentence at a white-collar detention facility in 2020.

Commenting on Deere’s growing fortunes, the worker added, “Earlier in the year they used a billion dollars to buy stocks, only to increase their stock value and make more money for the shareholders. That money could have been used to pay workers more; give better health insurance.”

Indeed, the inevitable attempts by Deere and the UAW to argue there is not enough money to meet the demands of workers are patently false.

Deere’s global net sales and revenues rose 19 percent in

the first quarter of 2021 to \$9.112 billion, and it has reaped billions in annual profits for a number of years, based on the concessions handed over by the UAW in 2015.

In February, Deere increased its dividend payout to shareholders from 76 cents per share to 90 cents a share, an approximate increase of 18 percent. “The dividend increase is a reflection of Deere’s recent strong performance and it shows our confidence in the company’s future direction,” boasted John C. May, Deere’s Chairman of the Board, President and Chief Executive Officer, at the time.

Deere is aiming to utilize the new contract to restructure its operations and carry out further attacks on workers’ wages, benefits and job protections in order to bolster the wealth of its shareholders.

Another Deere worker from Iowa said there is widespread sentiment to reject any further concessions to the company, telling the WSWS, “Most coworkers I talk to just plan on voting ‘no’—no matter what they offer. But even so, most voted ‘no’ last time, and somehow it passed.”

During the 2015 contract negotiations, many workers voiced their suspicion of ballot stuffing by the UAW. According to a document received by the WSWS, the contract passed by a margin of only 180 votes.

The worker continued, “We would like to take a summary of the contract home and look it over for a week and talk it out then vote, not one or two hours before. Six years is a long time.” In 2015, workers were given only a “highlight” summary of the contract hours before they were to vote on it.

Another worker spoke on the UAW’s history of attacks on its members, stating, “They passed out a paper of items that they thought would be good to negotiate and wanted us to rank what was important to us. I had to laugh because it was all stuff that past workers and pre-’97 people had [those hired before 1997] that the union negotiated out of the last contract.”

As it has throughout the auto industry and elsewhere, the UAW has spent decades suppressing opposition at Deere in order to assist the company in securing greater rates of profit. The last walkout called by the UAW at Deere began in 1986, in a “selective” strike in which the union initially called out only three of its 14 represented plants. The company, taking the measure of the UAW’s unwillingness to conduct a serious fight, went on the offensive and launched a national lockout, which lasted 163 days. Despite workers’ determination, the struggle

ended with a concessions agreement which facilitated Deere’s assault on jobs and which excluded a general wage increase.

The UAW’s sellout of the last strike at Deere was part of an overall assault on workers’ jobs and rights throughout basic industry. A series of bitter struggles in auto, steel, mining and meatpacking in the 1980s and 90s were sabotaged by the unions and defeated. At the same time, the UAW, in line with the trade unions elsewhere, integrated itself more and more into the structures of corporate management, beginning with then-President Douglas Fraser taking a seat on Chrysler’s board of directors in 1980.

As a lead UAW negotiator during the 1986 strike, James Hecker later admitted in comments to the *Moline Dispatch*, “We both (the UAW and Deere) really decided we needed to have a more collaborative than adversarial relationship—that sort of mindset. Over time, it became more collaborative.”

However, the 40-year period in which the unions were able to suppress workers’ resistance has come to an end. There have been a series of overwhelming rejections of union-backed concessions contracts this year, most significantly at Volvo Trucks, where workers organized the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee and voted down at least three UAW-backed sellout agreements.

The looming struggle at Deere can and must be won, but it requires the initiative of workers and new organizations. Rank-and-file committees will provide the means for workers to fight for what they genuinely need—including an end to the tier system, a 30 percent across-the-board wage increase, and an annual cost-of-living raise to make up for rising inflation—not what the company or the union claims is affordable.

Such committees will create the framework and organizational basis for workers at Deere in the Midwest to communicate and link up with their brothers and sisters at Deere’s operations throughout the world, and mobilize the collective strength of the international working class in a struggle for its common interests.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact