

Chicago-area mechanics enter sixth week of strike, while IAM continues to isolate walkout

Jessica Goldstein
7 September 2021

Chicago-area auto mechanics in International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 701 entered their sixth week on strike against the Chicago New Car Dealer Committee (NCDC) on Tuesday. Striking mechanics remain determined to win their demands for wage increases, especially for the lowest tier of lube-rack semi-skilled technicians, as well as for fully paid health care benefits and for no reduction to base rate pay.

At the same time, the IAM is continuing its strikebreaking and isolation tactics that it has employed since the beginning of the walkout, passing the “Defector’s deal” at individual dealerships and shutting down pickets.

On August 27, Local 701 issued a proposal to the NCDC that was not substantially different than previous proposals. It still included wage raises that were below the rate of inflation for all tiers: journeyman, apprentice and semi-skilled technicians. Poverty wages of just \$16 per hour were proposed by the union for semi-skilled technicians in the final pay schedule in 2023. Journeyman and apprentice technicians are to be guaranteed only 36 hours of base rate pay per week in the IAM’s proposals, less than the 40 hours per week that mechanics went on strike for in 2017 and which the IAM sold out for the current 36 hours of base rate pay, closer to what the dealerships had demanded.

Also, the August 27 proposal maintained language from the August 13 proposal that allows dealerships to reduce base rate pay for journeyman technicians if they do not meet a certain number of booked service hours in a given period. To make up for slow business times, which are out of a worker’s control, the worker would have to book more hours than needed to make base rate pay and prevent the dealers from docking their pay.

According to Local 701, the NCDC dealers at which mechanics were still striking rejected the August 27 proposal due to its inclusion of the “Most Favored Nation Clause,” and therefore, according to the language of the proposal, the IAM reverted back to its August 13 proposal to the NCDC. The clause essentially would have allowed individual dealers to pick and choose terms from other contracts that suit their business needs at any time to thwart the four-year negotiation schedule.

The IAM has also blatantly encouraged strikebreaking. In a post on its Facebook page September 1, the local linked to a list of a number of dealers with which it had signed side deals and encouraged workers and the public to take their cars in need of service to these “DEALERS THE UNION ASKS THAT YOU SUPPORT WITH YOUR BUSINESS.”

Local 701 suspended pickets temporarily during the Labor Day weekend from September 4-6, ostensibly to give workers a weekend off to spend with family, just as many people would be traveling who would have seen the pickets.

At the time of this writing, the union has not posted negotiations updates to their homepage or Facebook page since September 4. The IAM has been working with a deliberate strategy to keep strikers in the dark, while isolating them from workers in other sectors facing similar low pay, long hours and speedup.

Both the union and the NCDC want the strike to end, not so that workers can get a fair contract, but so that they can get back to work generating profits for the dealers.

The union’s role and alliance with the dealerships is reflected in their premeditated tactic of the Defector’s deal, which it has been passing at dealership after

dealership, effectively isolating and putting increased financial pressure on workers who remain on strike. The IAM has paid striking mechanics on average just one third or less of their weekly wages in strike pay, and workers still on strike have had to take COBRA health coverage after five weeks, which can cost workers thousands of dollars per month.

Striking mechanics at Hawk Ford in Oak Lawn, Illinois told the *World Socialist Web Site* that mechanics at dealerships that signed the local's Defector's deal were not able to read the contract or discuss the terms even after it was passed.

During the second-to-last week of August, the IAM had written on its homepage, in a post that has since been removed, that it was hoping to hold a contract vote for striking workers the following Sunday or Monday. It is not clear whether the vote was actually held, but workers remain on strike, either because they voted down a contract offer or because a contract vote was never held. Whatever the case may be, as in the 2017 strike, mechanics are determined to fight for their demands and not accept any offer that they see as acquiescing to the dealers.

The strikebreaking tactic of using isolation and financial strain to pressure workers to sign the dealer-friendly Defector's deal is another form of the same tactic that the IAM used during the last strike in 2017. The 2017 strike lasted for seven weeks, during which mechanics voted down the IAM's proposal once before the union was able to push through a deal. The union negotiated side deals with dealerships that took them out of the Standard Automotive Agreement bargaining pattern, undermining the remaining workers on strike.

On an even wider scale than in 2017, the Chicago-area mechanics strike is part of a broader growth of the class struggle, from striking Nabisco workers in a number of states to the rebellion taking place by Dana auto parts workers against both the United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers unions.

As in 2017, the WSWs is the only organization fighting for an alternative to the unions' defense of corporate profit interests, through the formation of rank-and-file committees, which proceed from what workers need, not what the corporations and unions say is affordable.

Like the mechanics of Local 701, this year workers at Volvo Trucks in Virginia and at Dana auto parts

plants across the US faced isolation by the trade unions and were put under immense pressure to accept contracts full of concessions to the corporations. The Volvo Trucks workers and more recently the Dana workers formed their own organizations to fight for their interests, the Volvo Workers' Rank-and-File Committee and Dana Workers' Rank-and-File Committee. The committees organized resistance at their respective plants to the repeated undemocratic methods of the unions aimed at forcing through sellout agreements.

Countering demands for concessions, the workers issued their own set of demands based on their needs, writing statements that appealed to workers worldwide and gained international support for their struggle. These provide powerful examples to the Chicago-area mechanics. It is essential that the rank-and-file committees expand and also fight to mobilize the strength of the working class, against the isolation tactics of the unions, in the fight for workers' rights.

The WSWs will help mechanics who want to build rank-and-file committees to expand and win their struggle. To learn about how to build a rank-and-file committee, contact the WSWs today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact