

“The contract was a slap in the face!”

Sterling, Illinois Dana workers unanimously rejected sellout deal by United Auto Workers

James Martin
13 September 2021

Last month, workers at the Dana auto parts manufacturing facility in Sterling, Illinois, unanimously voted down the sellout tentative agreement negotiated by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and United Steelworkers (USW), joining more than a dozen other plants that rejected the deal. Dana workers across the country are determined to fight against grueling industrial sweatshop conditions, including working for weeks on end without a single day off, low wages and widespread safety issues, including dangerous levels of exposure to COVID-19 at various plants.

An employee at the plant told the WSWS, “The contract was a slap in the face!!” He added, “We already voted for strike authorization. We voted 100 percent. That was done before the contract expired.”

“It sounds like Dana is in bed with the UAW,” he added.

Despite the decisive rejection of the contract proposal by Dana workers across the country, the UAW and the USW are forcing workers to stay on the job with an indefinite contract extension. The two unions are conspiring behind the backs of rank-and-file workers to help the multinational auto parts company stockpile parts in the event of a strike.

The Sterling plant is small, with only 23 full-time workers and four temp workers. However, it is strategically significant for both Dana and the motor vehicle industry as a whole. The facility produces drivetrain parts for the construction, agriculture and mining industry, including multinational corporations like John Deere, Caterpillar, Oshkosh, Autocar and JLG. It also has small contracts with the Detroit automakers Ford, General Motors and Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler). Over 10,000 workers at John

Deere are currently in a contract battle that pits them against both the company and the UAW with a number of locals showing overwhelming strike authorization votes.

Sterling is one of two plants which voted down the contract unanimously; it was followed by a 435–0 vote at the Toledo, Ohio, plant. Other plants rejected the contract by near-unanimous margins, including St. Clair, Michigan (97 percent), Auburn Hills, Michigan (96 percent), and Fort Wayne, Indiana (90 percent).

Sterling, formerly known as the “Hardware Capital of the World,” is located between the Chicago metropolitan area and the agricultural-manufacturing areas of Iowa. Sterling and its twin city Rock Falls have a combined population of 25,000, and the area is historically well-known for its steel and manufacturing.

The Dana employee at Sterling’s plant noted, “We’re more a specialty plant. We call it the junk drawer. Everything the bigger plants don’t want to run, they get Sterling to run.”

“I’m angry about money,” he noted, pointing to the fact that Dana workers at Sterling have received mere cents in increases over the last decade. “Our average hourly rate is \$18.79. Union dues, insurance coming out. Insurance ain’t bad, but that’s negotiated. The temp workers only make \$13 an hour. But here’s the situation. In the last 11 years since 2010 our hourly rate has gone up \$0.80 in 11 years. It sounds bad. But what’s worse is in January of 2021 we got a \$0.35 raise. It was the first hourly increase in 4 years. But in the last ten years since 2010 we got only a \$0.45 increase, or 4.5 cents a year! A couple lump sums that weren’t worth s—t. Gas has gone up. Utilities have gone up. Everything is going up in prices.”

“Even during COVID, they were crying they lost money. They didn’t lose money, they just didn’t make what their prediction was for sales. There’s a difference. We had a couple get COVID who were unvaccinated. They did offer vaccinations. But three people backed out. They said you have to clock out and not get paid for 1 hour. And you have to wait so long after the shot, so you lose time. What pissed everyone off was the office got paid, because they were salaried.”

“Once this gets voted down, I want a [new] proposal. Dana likes lump sums. They don’t like hourly increases. They proposed \$1,250. Whoopie! If you take taxes out that’s probably \$700.”

A 2003 “neutrality agreement” led to an agreement with Dana and the UAW that would allow the union collective bargaining rights in exchange for concessions on health care and more. In 2007, Dana offloaded its retiree health care onto the UAW, which took control of \$780 million in stock and cash. The UAW promptly cut retiree benefits and used the funds for its investment opportunities, which was similarly enacted at the Big Three companies.

The Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee, an independent network formed to help workers share information, organize democratic discussion and prepare a common strategy to fight both the concessions demanded by the company and the treachery of the unions, issued a statement last Friday in response to the contract extension. “Our ‘no’ vote showed we have tremendous potential power. The unions and corporations are going to such extremes to forestall a strike because the corporation is extremely vulnerable,” the statement read. “But we need a strategy for victory... Broad self-organization is our only protection against the USW-UAW-Dana conspiracy.”

To join the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee, send an email to danawrfc@gmail.com or text (248) 602-0936.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact