

Dana workers in powerful position to shut down auto industry and win their demands

WSWS Autoworker Newsletter
20 September 2021

The struggle of Dana Inc. auto parts workers against sweatshop conditions, low wages and 84-hour workweeks is entering a critical stage.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) and United Steelworkers (USW) have responded to Dana workers' 90 percent "no" vote on their proposed five-year contract by keeping workers on the job for 34 days past the expiration of the old contract. Union officials have ignored the overwhelming strike votes by workers. Instead, they have kept 3,500 workers on the job, producing profits for a company which has refused to budge an inch on workers' demands for decent wages and working conditions.

There is no doubt that the UAW and USW officials have assured the Dana bosses and their corporate customers—Ford, GM, Stellantis, Caterpillar and John Deere—that there will be no strike. They all know any disruption of the flow of axles, drive shafts and other critical components into their assembly plants would quickly force them to halt operations.

Instead, top "negotiators" UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada (2020 salary \$220,506) and USW District 7 Director Mike Millsap (\$153,498), who are working from the comfort of their luxurious homes, are forcing Dana workers to endure inhuman levels of overtime, accidents and unsafe conditions and the spread of COVID-19 cases in their plants and communities. In the meantime, they are keeping workers in the dark, lying to them about "future negotiations" and extending the old contract indefinitely.

The UAW and USW are trying to convince workers that they are powerless and must accept whatever the company demands. But the exact opposite is the case. Dana workers have *never been in a better position to fight the company and win their demands.*

Just-in-time delivery

In the 1980s, the auto companies introduced "just-in-time" and "lean manufacturing" processes to cut costs, slash tens of thousands of jobs and squeeze the maximum amount of profit from auto and auto parts workers. Instead of employing the workers and paying the costs to warehouse parts, the just-in-time system depended on the continuous delivery of small quantities of components, which are used within minutes of arriving at an

assembly plant's loading docks.

The whole system depends on a dependable supply chain of uninterrupted production, relentless speedup and ever-greater exploitation, overseen by the slave drivers of the UAW and USW. The introduction of two-tier wages and temp jobs, the gutting of health and safety and the abolition of the eight-hour day have enriched people like Dana Inc. CEO James Kamsickas, who makes \$10 million a year, as well as the leaders of the UAW, who have accepted bribes from the companies in exchange for enforcing their demands.

If the workers cannot be bossed around by pro-management unions, then the whole corporate strategy, which has worked so well for so long for the corporations and Wall Street, can suddenly become their greatest weakness.

The *Harvard Business Review* recently warned that "just-in-time" delivery gives the working class in each factory far too much power. Because of the increased interconnectivity of the global supply chain, strikes by a relatively small group of workers can bring entire industries to a standstill. *Harvard Business Review* notes:

"Manufacturers in most industries have turned to suppliers and subcontractors who narrowly focus on just one area, and those specialists, in turn, usually have to rely on many others. Such an arrangement offers benefits: You have a lot of flexibility in what goes into your product, and you're able to incorporate the latest technology. But you are left vulnerable when you depend on a single supplier somewhere deep in your network for a crucial component or material. If that supplier produces the item in only one plant or one country, your disruption risks are even higher."

The vulnerability of the auto industry has been revealed by the microchip shortage. Because of the spread of COVID-19 and public health lockdowns demanded by workers in Malaysia, Taiwan and other countries, GM, Ford, Toyota and other companies have been forced to shut down dozens of plants.

Model changeover

Dana is especially vulnerable to a strike right now because many plants are engaged in model changeovers and modifying their machines and production lines for the new 2022 vehicles. Dana

workers at Warren, Michigan; St. Clair, Michigan; Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Dry Ridge, Kentucky, report that they are currently engaged in these changeovers. This process usually takes three to four weeks and leaves Dana and the Big Three automakers in an extremely vulnerable position. If workers strike and halt production before these changes are completed, the rollout of the new models could be severely delayed.

One Dana worker with nearly 20 years of experience explained, “We must understand how important and how critical this time is for Dana due to the model change. We have to understand how affected the company would be if production stopped. If all of us walk out, they are in a bind. Model change is when you can hurt them. This is the perfect time to hit the company hard. In 3-4 weeks, this will be over, and they can run new parts. Then they will cut our hours, there will be no overtime pay, and our income will go way down.”

Big Three shifting to “critical plant status”

The global shortage of microchips has forced the Big Three automakers to shift their available supplies and manpower over to their most profitable models. Thousands of incomplete vehicles are also being stored with plans to install microchips when supplies arrive. It is one thing to build a car or vehicle without a microprocessor. It is quite another—and impossible—to assemble one without axles, driveshafts or gaskets.

Last week, the UAW and Stellantis announced that they are imposing a mandatory seven-day work schedule for all workers at the 7,000-worker Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) near Detroit, where the highly profitable Ram 1500 pickup truck is produced. By directing so much labor to these highly profitable vehicles, the corporation is rolling the dice that it can keep rolling the trucks off the assembly line. This only deepens the industry’s reliance on parts from Dana *right now*. Workers at Dana’s Auburn Hills, Michigan, plant produce the Ram 1500’s driveshafts, and workers at the Dry Ridge, Kentucky, plant manufacture the Dana 60 rear axles for the 1500.

Gasket shortage at Danville, Kentucky

Dana is *even more vulnerable* because the company has not been able to sufficiently speed up production of gaskets, without which no vehicle can be assembled. Workers at Dana’s Danville, Kentucky, plant report that the company is having a very difficult time producing enough gaskets to meet demand.

Shortages in steel and graphite mean the company has not been able to stockpile this critical part, which is required for all vehicle production. This, in addition to worker shortages caused in part by the spread of COVID-19 throughout the plant and in part by low wages, means that one of the Danville buildings is a year behind

on orders, while another building is at least a month behind.

Workers need a strategy for victory

There is such a thing as historical retribution. For decades, the capitalist corporate owners have been able to strip the working class of gains won over generations of struggle and turn the clock back to the 19th century, when workers were little more than industrial slaves. Today, sweatshop conditions not only exist in Mexico, India and China; they exist in Michigan, Kentucky and Indiana, including in “union shops” like Dana.

All over the US and the world, workers are saying enough is enough when it comes to falling living standards and rising prices, the theft of pensions and health care, and the criminal response to the pandemic, which has sacrificed lives for corporate profit. In the US, there is a growing wave of struggles by teachers, nurses, coal miners, carpenters and other workers who are fighting not only the corporations and the corporate-controlled political parties but the bought-and-paid-for unions. In Germany, train, hospital and airport workers are engaged in struggles, and workers at Dana’s plant in Essen, Germany, have expressed their solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the US.

Dana workers can and must transform an understanding of their profound industrial power into action. This means breaking the stranglehold of the UAW and USW, expanding the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee (DWRFC) and reaching out to the workers at the Big Three automakers, Deere & Co., Caterpillar and their fellow parts workers at Lear, Magna, American Axle and other corporations in the US and internationally.

Many Dana workers are saying, “Strike while the iron is hot.” In fact, the iron has never been hotter. A real struggle can and must be led by the workers themselves. This requires organization. Workers should join the DWRFC and build rank-and-file strike committees at their plants to share information, outline their demands and prepare for collective action.

To contact the Dana Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email DanaWRFC@gmail.com or text (248) 602-0936?.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wswp.org/contact