IAM declares contract ratified, orders Chicago area mechanics back to work after eight-week strike

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27 September 2021

Hundreds of Chicago-area auto mechanics received back-to-work orders from International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 701 Monday morning after eight weeks on strike after a union spokesman announced the deal with the New Car Dealers of Chicago (NCDC) had "narrowly passed." The ratification announcement followed a 9:00 a.m. Sunday morning vote on the tentative agreement (TA) by mechanics employed at the approximately 35 dealerships that remained on strike.

Local 701 did not post vote totals or percentages on its Facebook page or website. A union post on Facebook said that the totals would not be publicly reported.

The vote was called under conditions where workers were facing increased financial pressures and only days away from having to pay inflated health insurance costs through COBRA. This under conditions where workers had been receiving strike benefits amounting to only one-half to one-third of their regular pay.

Details of the contract posted by the IAM on its website Saturday confirm that the agreement contains significant concessions. Over the course of the four-year agreement, journeymen service technicians will have their wages increased by $5.35 per hour; journeymen body shop technicians will have their wages increased by $4.42 per hour, while journeymen apprentices will have their hourly rates increased by about $2 per hour over 5 years. Apprentices are required to complete training in 60 months and currently start at $21.00 per hour.

Skilled technicians start at just $16.00 per hour currently and will see their wages increase to just $18.00 per hour upon completion of a "12-month progression period," after which they will earn just 60 cents more per hour for the rest of the contract following the completion of the progression period.

Semi-skilled lube rack technicians, the lowest tier of auto mechanics, start at $15.00 per hour and will have wage increases of just 50 cents per hour over the four years of the contract. These wages, as one semi-skilled tech described to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, are what fast food workers can earn in the same city.

Technicians did not win any increase in base pay hours; the base rate pay for journeymen technicians remains at 36 hours per week. This had been a major issue after the IAM sold out the last strike in 2017, when mechanics struck for 40 hours per week of guaranteed base rate pay, but the union settled for just 36.

Overall, all wage increases across all skill levels are below the rate of inflation, putting pressure on mechanics to continue working well beyond 36 hours per week in order to maintain their standard of living.

On top of what are essentially paycuts, the IAM has also done away with the 100 percent employer-paid Premier health insurance plan in this contract and offers only the Premier Plus plan costing $10 per pay period.

In an even more significant concession, the contract gives dealers the right to decrease their base rate pay if they book fewer than 36 hours of service per week for any length of time. The TA stated, "When a Journeyman Technician fails to average booked hours greater than 85% of 36 hours and those total booked hours are less than 85% of the average of all Journeyman Technicians hours, both measured during a calendar year quarter, may, at the Employer's discretion, have his weekly base pay reduced by up to two hours of the weekly base pay guarantee, for the following calendar-year quarter."

This allows the dealers to take advantage of present conditions, in which car sales in the US have fallen since the onset of the global pandemic in late 2019.

The contract also contains language under the Pandemic-Related Absences article that penalizes mechanics who

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must take time off from work to protect themselves or family members who have underlying health conditions from contracting COVID-19. If the dealer cannot provide an accommodation to the worker, which is not specified, and the worker is prohibited from working in the shop by a doctor, then the worker must take an unpaid leave of absence. Like the teachers' unions, the United Auto Workers union, the food production unions and others, the IAM is helping corporations to coin profits at the expense of lives and health at a point in time when COVID-19 cases and deaths are rising to critical levels.

To push through this concessions-laden deal, the IAM employed the same strikebreaking tactics that it used in the 2017 strike. This time, instead of waiting for weeks to announce that it had negotiated side deals with dealerships on strike, it began to negotiate side deals, or Defector's deals, at the outset. This effectively splintered the strike dealer by dealer, leaving fewer and fewer workers on the picket lines.

At the same time the IAM sought to place maximum financial pressure on workers by limiting strike pay to starvation levels. Union affiliates actively encourages workers to essentially cross picket lines by taking jobs at dealers with which the IAM had signed defector's deals. According to workers who spoke to the WSWS at dealerships where the defector's deals were reached, none of the mechanics knew exactly what was in the contract language that was signed between the union and the dealers,

Like it did in 2017, this strikebreaking tactic played into the hands of the dealers because it fractured the strike. The dealerships that negotiated these contracts with the IAM were taken off the Standard Automotive Agreement, meaning that the next time that the local goes on strike, only about one-third of those who initially went on strike in 2021 will stand on the picket lines.

To put this into perspective, in 2017, about 2,000 mechanics went on strike across the Chicago area. In 2021, about 800 mechanics, or less than half that number, went on strike. Now, the number of mechanics included in the pattern agreement has dwindled even further.

Mechanics and their family members expressed frustration on social media directed against the union for isolating and betraying the strike.

"I hope you got us over the defector deal because if you didn't, it just solidifies how much you don't care for us. BETTER THAN DEFECTOR OR NO DEAL," one wrote.

In response, the IAM ramped up attacks on workers. "Complain complain. You cupcakes have to cut the reps some slack! You have no clue how hard their job is and how much crap they have to deal with. If you don't like the contract vote it down. ... But could you please stop whining like a little schoolgirl its embarrassing us all," one Local 701 hack wrote on the day the TA was announced.

In response, a family member posted, "Are you standing on the line?" Another worker wrote, "I doubt it, they were all working and forgot we were out there just like the union did."

The strike has been an important experience, part of mounting resistance to the growth of social inequality in which the working class finds itself confronting not just the capitalist ruling class but unions that no longer represent their interests.

There is a way for workers to continue the necessary fight against the attacks on their living standards in a time of unprecedented social inequality and under conditions of the global pandemic. Workers can and must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, as new organizations of struggle that will fight for the interests of workers, not the profit interests of big business.

Mechanics have powerful allies. Already workers have taken the initiative in forming rank-and-file committees including the Volvo Workers' Rank-and-File Committee, Dana Workers' Rank-and-File Committee, and committees formed by educators in the US and across the world.

The WSWS will do everything possible to assist mechanics in the Chicago area that want to continue the fight. To start a committee at your shop, contact the WSWS at this link.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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