

As John Deere-UAW contract expires, Deere workers resolved to fight

George Gallanis, Marcus Day
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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?.

The previous six-year contract between the United Auto Workers (UAW) and farm and construction equipment giant Deere & Company expired at midnight on October 1, setting the stage for a possible strike of 10,100 workers from Iowa, Illinois and Kansas.

However, early Friday morning, the UAW announced an extension of the agreement, “instructing its members to return to work as normal.” According to company statements, the previous contract has been extended two weeks, until October 15.

Iowa’s *Des Moines Register* reported that Deere workers stopped work as the contract expired at midnight, only to be told minutes later by UAW locals to continue production under the extension.

The UAW kept workers in the dark over the content of its discussions with Deere and whether there would be a strike up until the last moment. “They did this same thing six years ago,” a worker at one of Deere’s facilities in the Quad Cities told the WSWs. “In 2015 we didn’t get word until almost 2:00 a.m.”

On Thursday, workers voiced their resolve to fight for a contract that meets their demands. Another worker told the WSWs, “We’re sick of getting sold out. It’s time to take a stand and fight back.” A third said, “For weeks now I’ve been talking to workers who’ve been telling me they’re ready to strike.”

Workers commenting on the Waterloo, Iowa UAW Local 838 Facebook page on Thursday evening pressed for strike action, with some appealing a walkout even if the UAW doesn’t call one.

“Send us walking! They will not present a contract we are willing to be a part of. 10k signing bonus is not

what we are looking for. TAKE US OUT!!!!,” one worker said.

Another wrote, “Better be striking tonight or put your for sale signs on that building and tell all your committee to get back to work no more living high on the hog in your offices.”

“Strike no matter what tonight. Send a clear message to John Deere for a great contract and for future contracts,” commented another. A fourth wrote, “What if they don’t call the strike and we take it upon ourselves and not go in/walk.”

Deere workers must not allow control of the situation to remain with the UAW, which has betrayed one struggle after another for decades at Deere, Caterpillar and throughout the auto industry. Early in September, the UAW announced it would hold a contract ratification vote on October 10, more than a week after the expiration of the previous contract, even though negotiations were supposedly still underway.

This shows that the discussions taking place between union officials and Deere executives are not “negotiations” between two adversaries but planning sessions over how to force through a contract which was worked out long ago. A week later, the union publicized an initial “offer” from the company containing massive givebacks on health care and overtime, in an evident attempt to manage workers’ expectations.

The WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers to take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file committees. Such committees will formulate demands based on what workers need, including an immediate end to the tier system, substantial wage increases for all workers, the restoration of fully funded health care and pensions and more. Plans and an appeal for joint action should be made to link up with workers

at auto parts maker and Deere supplier Dana Corporation, where a UAW-backed concessions agreement was recently voted down by 90 percent.

There is an immense amount of pent-up anger after workers' experience with the 2015 UAW-Deere contract, not to mention the nearly 25 years of a divisive wage and benefit tier system, increasingly precarious job security and ever-growing demands for speedup.

In 2015, the UAW did not release any information on the tentative agreement until the contract votes themselves, distributing only selective "highlights" of the six-year deal. Despite widespread opposition to the contract, the UAW claimed it passed by a margin of less than 200 votes, with many workers calling for a recount, which the UAW predictably ignored.

The head of negotiations for the UAW at the time, former Vice President Norwood Jewell, later pleaded guilty for his part in a bribery conspiracy with automaker Fiat Chrysler. Jewell was released early from his minimum-security "Club Fed" prison last year, allowed to serve the rest of his sentence at home due to the coronavirus pandemic.

On September 12, Deere workers authorized to strike by a margin of 99 percent, a clear signal of their determination to fight. This stood in stark contrast to the UAW's release of scant details of the company's provocative initial "offer," which included the ending of a plant closure moratorium, an increase in workers' share of health care premiums from 0 to 20 percent, and ending overtime pay for working over eight hours.

Such a "proposal" is all the more provocative given the enormous amounts of money Deere has been making.

The latest financial results show Deere brought in profits of over \$1.6 billion for the third quarter of its fiscal year alone. In August, Deere was forecasting that its net income for fiscal 2021 would be between \$5.7 and \$5.9 billion. At \$15.58 million in compensation last year, Deere CEO John C. May made 220 times the median employee pay of \$70,743.

Deere's board of directors is comprised of a "who's who" of the corporate and political elite, including Alan Heuberger, a senior investment manager at BMGI (Bill and Melinda Gates Investments, the private family investment fund of the billionaire couple); Dmitri L. Stockton, former top executive of General Electric and

GE Asset Management Inc.; Michael O. Johanns, retired US Senator from Nebraska and former US Secretary of Agriculture; Charles O. (Chad) Holliday, Jr., former CEO at DuPont; former CEO of agribusiness giant Cargill, Inc.; and Sherry M. Smith, former Gregory R. Page, CFO of Supervalu Inc, a \$35 billion supermarket chain based in Minnesota.

The UAW is pushing for a contract that meets the demands of these corporate executives and Deere's Wall Street backers, not the workers.

But Deere workers hold a powerful and strategic place in the American and global economy. A recent report in the *Wall Street Journal*, "U.S. Farm Belt Revival Prompts Mad Dash for 'Dirt and Iron,'" noted, "A monthslong rally in prices for major agricultural commodities such as corn and soybeans is pushing up incomes for U.S. farmers and unleashing spending and investment that had been subdued for years."

It continued, "Prices for new and used farm equipment have soared, as rising sales and disruptions in key components, such as semiconductor chips, cause shortages and delivery delays for new machinery."

Workers have powerful allies among the working class in the US and internationally. Deere has factories and facilities in more than 70 countries, with nearly 69,000 employees.

What is needed is the formation of a John Deere Worker Rank-and-File Committee to provide the means to link up and communicate across Deere plants in Iowa, Illinois and Kansas and internationally, and with workers at Caterpillar, Volvo, Mack Trucks, Amazon, the auto plants and elsewhere. All over the world, sentiment among workers is growing for a common fight against low wages, intolerable working conditions, and an end to the pro-corporate policies which have seen millions die needlessly from the COVID-19 pandemic.

We urge Deere workers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today to discuss organizing a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



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