

Deere workers: Form rank-and-file strike committees to prepare for company-wide walkout Wednesday night!

WSWS Autoworkers Newsletter
11 October 2021

To learn more about joining the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email deerewfc@gmail.com or text (484) 514-9797.

Deere workers' colossal defeat on Sunday of the pro-company contract backed by the United Auto Workers, in a 90 percent "no" vote, is a powerful indication that workers are ready and determined to fight after suffering decades of concessions enforced by the UAW.

Deere workers are standing up and saying, "Now is our time!" At meetings preceding the votes on Sunday and in numerous comments on Facebook, workers demanded strike action and denounced the UAW for once again pushing a contract dictated by the company.

As many workers recognize, there may never again be a moment so exceptionally favorable to strike and win serious advances for themselves, their families, retired workers and the next generation. Deere has made record profits this year and billions more since the last contract, dubiously "ratified" by a supposedly 180-vote margin in 2015. The company is already struggling to hire and retain sufficient numbers of workers to make headway on its substantial backlog of orders. Rising farm income is fueling even greater demand for the enormously complex and valuable equipment Deere workers produce.

With workers in such a strong position, now is the time to act! Rank-and-file strike committees must be formed at every Deere factory and warehouse in order to prepare for a company-wide walkout on Wednesday night, whether the UAW calls one or not. If there is to be a serious struggle, workers themselves must undertake the organization of it.

The UAW, for its part, has no intention of conducting any fight whatsoever, as its record over the last 40 years and all its actions in the so-called "negotiations" with the company this year show. Workers are thus entering into a battle with two fronts: against Deere and against the UAW.

The UAW's ongoing conspiracy with Deere

In a terse, three-sentence announcement of the contract rejection Sunday night, UAW Vice President Chuck Browning, head of the union's agricultural equipment and Ford departments, said that the UAW bargaining team was reconvening in Moline, Illinois on Monday, and that a strike deadline had been set for 11:59 p.m. this Wednesday, October 13.

Browning and his fellow highly paid bureaucrats are clearly stunned and frightened by the scale of the opposition to their deal with Deere, which they had attempted to sell with false claims that it contains "substantial gains" for workers. They are now stalling, hoping to buy time and find some way to prevent a strike and push through the same basic terms demanded by the company: wage increases below inflation, attacks on

pensions for new hires, and the continuation of previous concessions in health care and retirement benefits.

There is no reason to believe that the UAW will now "get the message" from the 90 percent no vote and end its decades-long collusion with Deere.

Throughout the year, the UAW kept Deere workers in the dark on its talks with the company. Minutes after the midnight expiration of the previous six-year contract on October 1, as workers began to stop production, the union announced a two-week extension, ordering work to continue in defiance of the near-unanimous strike authorization vote in September.

Later that afternoon, after workers had taken to social media overnight and in the morning to voice their outrage over the last-minute extension and demand a strike, the UAW announced it had reached a tentative agreement with the company that contained "significant economic gains," in the words of Browning.

The UAW kept the details of the deal a secret, ignoring demands by workers for the immediate release of the full contract and a week to study it. The locals responded to the growing discontent with outright censorship, disabling comments on their Facebook pages and arrogantly telling workers that "negativity is not welcome."

At the "informational" meetings immediately before the contract vote on Sunday, UAW officials reacted angrily to workers' condemnations of the agreement, insisting that it was a "good deal" and the best the company could do.

If there were any remaining doubts over whom the UAW now represents, such actions should dispel it once and for all. The UAW is a bought-and-paid-for representative of the corporations, serving them as a labor police force, enforcing their demands and continually riding roughshod over workers' democratic will. Nothing UAW officials say can be trusted.

The so-called UAW "Deere National Negotiating and Bargaining" committees have already made clear they are utterly contemptuous of workers' demands for raises large enough to make up for years of stagnation and freezes; the end of the tier system; the restoration of company-paid health care benefits and pensions for all workers and retirees; and serious improvements in working conditions.

The so-called "negotiations," in reality, conspiratorial talks with Deere, have been led by upper-middle class bureaucrats such as Browning (2020 compensation, \$204,338), UAW Region 8 Director Mitchell Smith (\$219,086), and UAW Region 4 Director Ron McInroy (\$214,322), all of whom worked closely with the embezzlers and bribe-takers on the UAW's executive board who are now serving time behind bars. The pro-company line from the UAW national headquarters also received the unflinching support of their obedient hand-raisers at the local level.

The UAW “negotiators” inhabit a completely different universe from the day-to-day needs, interests, concerns and exploitation of the workers they claim to represent. Workers should demand their immediate resignation, to be replaced with delegations of trusted workers elected from the rank and file at every Deere location, including veteran workers, new hires and retirees.

Workers at Deere are in an immensely powerful position, and not only because of the current labor shortage and the company’s record profits. The overwhelming contract rejection on Sunday is the latest in a series of such votes this year, with workers defying union-backed concessionary agreements in growing numbers. Only a few of the most notable include:

- Warrior Met in Alabama, where coal miners rejected a UMWA-backed deal by 1,006 to 45 in April and have been striking since then

- Volvo Trucks in Virginia, where workers voted down three UAW-backed concessions deals between May and July

- Frito-Lay in Topeka, where workers rejected four contracts pushed by the BCTGM union

- Dana Inc., an auto parts maker and supplier of Deere, where workers also voted by 90 percent to reject a concessions contract backed by the UAW and United Steelworkers union in late August.

Lessons of the struggle at Volvo

The experience at Volvo Trucks earlier this year is particularly crucial for Deere workers to study, in order to understand what strategy the UAW is proceeding with and how to combat it.

At Volvo, the UAW initially called a limited two-week strike in April, before announcing a tentative agreement and shutting down the walkout without holding a vote on the deal or even releasing any details. Volvo workers were outraged to learn days later that UAW claims of “significant economic gains” were in fact wage increases below inflation, major increases to health care costs, the continuation of the tier system and significant attacks on working conditions.

After workers voted down that agreement by 91 percent and a virtually identical one also backed by the union just a few weeks later, the UAW felt it had no choice but to call a second strike in June. It did so, however, in order to head off a complete rebellion by workers and with the aim of sabotaging the strike.

The UAW maintained a total information blackout on the struggle, concealing it from autoworkers and other workers for fear that they would take inspiration from the Volvo strikers’ courageous stand.

The walkout was deliberately isolated by the UAW to just Volvo’s New River Valley plant in Virginia, with the union refusing to call out workers at Volvo-owned Mack Trucks plants in Maryland and Pennsylvania, despite persistent calls for joint action by workers.

At the same time, the UAW used its control of the nearly \$800 million strike fund to economically throttle the struggle, starving workers on the picket lines with just \$275 a week in strike pay. This took place as hundreds of UAW officials and staffers at the misnamed “Solidarity House” continued to take in their full six-figure salaries.

Throughout, then-Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry, head of the UAW’s Heavy Trucks Department, served as the chief conspirator, overseeing the talks and signing off on every pro-company contract, declaring each one “the best they were going to get.” In the midst of the second Volvo strike in July, Curry assumed the UAW presidency.

On the other side, the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee played

the central role in rallying opposition to the company-UAW gang-up. The committee worked to break through the isolation imposed on the strike, appealing to Mack Trucks and autoworkers for support, as well as Volvo workers internationally. This appeal found a powerful initial response, with workers at Volvo in Belgium launching a wildcat strike against a secret deal agreed to by the union to lengthen their workweek, shortly after learning about the struggle of their coworkers in Virginia.

After striking Volvo workers voted down a third agreement between the UAW and the company, and with the struggle threatening to expand, the union conspired with the company to force a re-vote on the exact same contract just days later. In total contempt for workers’ democratic rights, both the company and the UAW declared that the contract would be imposed no matter which way the vote went.

There nevertheless remained intense opposition to the deal among workers. On July 14, after an unexplained delay of several hours, the UAW claimed the agreement had been ratified by a margin of just 17 votes out of several thousand, and subsequently ignored all calls for a recount or another vote. While the UAW was able to enforce the deal in the immediate term, by way of intimidation and lies, it did so at the cost of even further discrediting itself, and Volvo workers returned to the New River Valley plant in a defiant mood.

Form rank-and-file strike committees!

The 10,000-plus Deere workers are a powerful battalion of the industrial working class. They must recognize that they are preparing to enter into the broader class war which is developing, as workers in the US and in other countries take a stand against relentless corporate demands for speedup and new attacks on wages and benefits.

The conditions Deere workers are struggling against have been sharply intensified by the consequences of the ruling class’s disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While Deere workers were designated “essential” since the onset of the coronavirus in order for the company to continue churning out equipment and driving up its profits, the real attitude of the corporate executives, as well as the UAW, was made clear by their insulting contract proposal, as well as their ever-growing indifference to the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

Shortages of semiconductors and other supply chain disruptions triggered by the pandemic are continuing, driven by the anarchy of capitalist production and the refusal of the big business governments all over the world to implement the necessary policies to eradicate the virus. Determined to insulate their profits from the impact of their own criminal policies, Deere, their Wall Street backers and the corporate elite as a whole are now set on containing and driving down labor costs and deepening the exploitation of workers.

Deere workers, however, have allies who are far stronger and more numerous: the hundreds of thousands and millions of workers in the US and internationally looking for a way to put an end to low wages and intolerable working conditions. This includes the tens of thousands of Deere workers in Mexico, Brazil, Germany, India and other countries. It also includes the 3,500 Dana auto parts workers, who the UAW and USW continue to keep on the job on a day-to-day contract extension, as well as workers at other ag and heavy equipment manufacturers such as Caterpillar, Case IH and Volvo.

Deere workers should appeal to their brothers and sisters at all these companies and others for support and a common struggle. But the mobilization of this immense social force requires new organizations, rank-and-file factory committees independent of the pro-corporate unions.

Workers at Deere have already taken the critically important first steps,

initiating the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee last week. The committee issued a statement in the lead-up to the vote calling for a rejection of the contract which was read thousands of times, and which posed the following minimum demands for an agreement to be acceptable:

- An immediate end to the tier system by restoring fully paid health care and pensions for all workers
- A 30 percent across-the-board pay increase to make up for the years of wage freezes and stagnation
- An annual cost-of-living escalator clause to keep up with inflation
- Fully paid health care benefits for retirees and their widows, with no co-pays or premiums
- The abolition of the CIPP productivity improvement regime, with no loss of pay
- No mandated overtime, so that we have time to spend with our families and time-and-a-half pay for voluntary overtime over eight hours and on weekends
- Workers' oversight of safety protocols to stop the spread of COVID-19. The right to halt production and close the plant for full cleaning, with guaranteed compensation to workers for all missed time if there are COVID-19 outbreaks.

This committee must now be expanded, linking up and coordinating with rank-and-file strike committees at every Deere workplace. Such committees will provide a vital means for workers to share information and circumvent the censorship and news blackout of the UAW and enable them to develop and execute a strategy which proceeds from what workers need, not the company's profit interests.

We urge workers to learn more about joining the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Email deerewrfc@gmail.com or text (484) 514-9797.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact