

Deere workers reject UAW-backed concessions contract by 90 percent

Marcus Day, George Gallanis

10 October 2021

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

Workers at agricultural equipment giant Deere and Company decisively rejected a concessions contract backed by the United Auto Workers union on Sunday by a 90 percent margin. The six-year deal was for 10,100 workers at Deere's operations in Illinois, Iowa and Kansas.

The results mark the first rejection of a UAW-backed contract at Deere in 35 years, according to workers, a humiliating repudiation of the UAW's pro-company agreement. The UAW, while keeping workers on the job for now, announced Sunday night that it had set a strike deadline for midnight on Wednesday, October 13. Workers voted almost unanimously to authorize a strike last month.

The margin of defeat was particularly high in the following locations:

- UAW Local 838 in Waterloo, Iowa, reported 2,518 voted "no" and 189 voted "yes," a 93 percent margin. Waterloo is home to the largest operations by Deere in Iowa.

- At Deere's facility in Dubuque, workers voted 1,174–97 against, a 92 percent margin.

- In Des Moines, the Iowa state capital, the vote was 595–61 against, a 90.7 percent margin.

- At Deere's Harvester Works in East Moline, Illinois, workers voted 993–102 against, a 90.6 percent margin.

The deal would have included general wage increases averaging roughly 2 percent a year over six years, an effective cut to real wages. In addition, it would have eliminated pensions for workers hired after November 2021, creating an additional tier of workers on top of those previously accepted by the UAW in 1997.

With Deere having already reported record profits for the year, and over \$15 billion in profits in the course of the previous contract, workers rightly took the contract proposal as an insult.

The overwhelming contract rejection is a powerful show of solidarity by Deere workers, expressing their determination to win genuine advances in their wages and benefits and reverse years of concessions enforced by the UAW.

The repudiation of the UAW contract is part of an overall growth of struggles by the working class in the US and internationally. Major strikes are already taking place among food production workers, coal miners, nurses and transit workers. Last week, more than 150,000 metalworkers in South Africa launched a strike demanding wages above the rate of inflation.

The vote was also the fifth rejection by autoworkers of a major contract proposal by the UAW in as many months. This includes three consecutive rejections at Volvo Trucks, and the rejection of a global agreement proposed by the UAW and the United Steelworkers at auto parts maker Dana Inc.

While the contract rejection at Deere is a significant achievement by workers, the UAW will not seek "significant improvements" to its deal with the company, as the experience of the strike at Volvo Trucks earlier this year demonstrated. There, workers voted down three UAW-backed contracts—the first two times also by 90 percent—only to have the UAW force a re-vote on the third tentative agreement, which it then claimed passed by just 17 ballots.

Workers at Deere are in an extremely powerful position. But the UAW, if it is forced to call a strike, would seek to sabotage workers' strength and isolate them, as they did at Volvo Trucks, in order to ram through a deal essentially the same as the one which

was rejected on Sunday.

The task now is to expand the recently formed Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee throughout every one of Deere's plants and warehouses, to develop workers' own initiative independent of the union, take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats and build up support for their struggle across the country and the world.

On Friday, the committee issued a statement in the lead-up to the vote calling for rejection of the pro-company agreement. The committee is demanding a minimum 30 percent raise for all workers to make up for years of wage stagnation, the abolition of the tiers, and the restoration of health care and pensions for retirees.

Throughout the day, workers told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that there was intense opposition voiced at so-called UAW "informational meetings" before the votes.

One worker told the WSWS after he attended a session, "The president and vice president are trying like hell to sell us this crap."

"They expect people to report to work this evening on third shift as if nothing significant is happening," a worker at Deere's plant in Ottumwa, Iowa, said. "The lack of updates and information is cruel. People are dealing with all the emotions that come with how things are being conducted, such as stress, anxiety, and a looming cloud of uncertainty as far as what day to day looks like currently being a Deere employee."

"Everybody is demanding to strike," a worker who attended the meeting in the Quad Cities said. "They are saying they should have never come to us with a worthless contract." The worker said that UAW officials, for their part, were "getting angry with the members, saying that they thought it was a good contract. The members are coming back saying you don't back your members. It got really heated. We should have walked out at midnight [when the contract expired]."

A Deere worker from Dubuque, Iowa, said, "It's a sign of strength. The rank and file just spoke.

"Deere and the UAW tried to pull a fast one, but the rank and file fought back. Throughout this whole time, I never heard the UAW mention the phrase 'corporate greed' like they used to. Deere has made billions, but they don't want to criticize them too much."

???"It's obvious: they didn't want us to vote no, and they don't want us to go on strike. If we go on strike, there will be a global effect, a chain reaction in the global economy. That's how powerful we are."

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